*King Lear*: Noble Lies and the Nature of Politics

# Introduction

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 inattentive members of the audience and much of the assembled company, but has been carefully planned in advance, possibly with the help of Lear’s chief counsellors, and certainly with their approval (1.1.1-7). Although Lear has rejected Cordelia by the time that he fully reveals his scheme to secure his succession, we can infer from the speech in which he formally transfers his power to Goneril and Regan that his 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 thus 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” (1.1.79-82, 1.1.127-39, 1.1.189-91). [[1]](#endnote-1) It is significant that neither Gloucester nor the forthright Kent expresses any objection to this original scheme in their opening conversation.[[2]](#endnote-2) 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).

Kent and Gloucester are surprised by only one aspect of the planned division: 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 lacks a male heir, and clearly wishes to circumvent any conventional expectations that Goneril might inherit his sovereign power as his eldest daughter, he clearly needs a plan of succession in order to ensure the future stability of the kingdom. This scheme 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 of her sisters’ potentially disruptive ambition. Indeed, we may infer from the conversation between Kent and Gloucester which opens the play that Lear has even understood that Cornwall will be a less just ruler than Albany, but decides in the end that it would be imprudent to act on this understanding, presumably because he sees that 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” (1.1.43-45).

Overall, despite its ultimate failure, for which, I will argue, the king himself is only partly responsible, the plan could actually be seen as the final 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.”[[3]](#endnote-3) It is important to note that the rage which overcomes Lear 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 (1.1.139-46). The prudence and warm-heartedness which have previously characterised Lear’s reign are reflected not only in his preference for Albany over Cornwall and for Cordelia over her sisters, but in his choice of Gloucester and Kent as his chief advisors, both of whom show enormous loyalty later on in the play.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The “darker purpose” of the love test (1.1.36) is to justify and gain public consent for the prearranged, unequal division of the kingdom, in which the youngest daughter is, unconventionally, to be given the controlling share, while using the ambition of Goneril and Reagan to trick them into complying with the scheme with an appearance of devoted obedience.[[5]](#endnote-5) Lear keeps his plan for the love test entirely secret, even perhaps from Kent and Gloucester, probably in order to ensure that the two elder sisters are caught off guard. For all Goneril and Reagan know, as they consider the matter in the heat of the moment, 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.[[6]](#endnote-6) Perhaps Lear hopes to ensure her compliance by making it clear at this point that the love test is irrelevant, since he has already decided that she should be his successor. Regan is better placed than Goneril to have discovered the scheme if given the time to do so, but Lear hurries through the exercise, no doubt precisely in order to conceal its inconsistencies.

We may infer from the above that just rule tends to involve the cunning manipulation of common opinion. Lear’s decision to present what is in fact a premeditated choice as a spontaneous effort to choose between different degrees of passionate devotion reflects his shrewd understanding that political authority is invariably strengthened if it is perceived to be rooted in nature rather than arbitrarily imposed. Because the populace as a whole cannot be expected to value Cordelia’s professions of “care and duty,” which are indeed commensurate with her passionate “love,” just as she claims, over her sisters’ superficial obsequiousness, they have to be manipulated into sharing Lear’s natural esteem for his youngest daughter (1.1.100-02).

Thus, ironically, Lear can only secure the position of Cordelia, whom he loves with an entirely spontaneous affection, and whose own loving nature makes her his natural successor, through a cunning artifice which temporarily debases that love. Shakespeare foregrounds the tension between natural feeling and the demands of politics as a key theme in the play’s opening lines: Lear’s reluctant decision to scale down the territory which is to be offered to Albany, despite his personal affection for the duke and even his percipient understanding that he would rule more justly than Cornwall, demonstrates, in the words of a perceptive critic, 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.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Having made this decision, Lear even schools himself to give Cornwall primacy when he addresses his two son in laws: “Our son of Cornwall, and you, our no less loving son of Albany” (1.1.41-42).

Another example of the dissimulation which politics inevitably involves is the need for those in authority to project an illusion of infallibility, or at least robust and consistent decisiveness. Lear points to the accommodations which are required in order to ensure that his “potency” is always “made good” when he warns the exasperated Kent that he “durst never yet” “break [his] vow,” since “nor our nature nor our place can bear” contradiction (1.1.168-72). His reference to “nature” as well as “place” shows that he recognises the need to present himself as innately assertive and determined, but the word “durst” hints at the constraints which this necessity imposes, and indeed might be seen as an early expression of regret regarding his abrupt change of plan. Whereas Lear is clearly willing to expose his vacillations over the share of land to be allotted to Cornwall and Albany to his closest advisors, his public presentation of this matter is absolutely decisive (compare 1.1.1-7 with 1.1.63-82). Thus, Shakespeare suggests that political authority naturally demands the fabrication of a persona which is stronger and wiser than most real individuals could ever hope to be.

Lear’s initial concern is not that Cordelia does not love him, but that she responds to the love test in a manner so utterly shorn of sentiment as to make it very difficult 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 Lear to declare that he preferred her heartfelt and understated style to the fulsome eloquence of her sisters, as was no doubt his plan: “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 when planning to present her with this *fait accompli* he could have had no idea that she would register her disapproval by actively minimising the heartfelt affection which he knows that she actually feels (1.1.91-104). Her profession of cool dutifulness is hardly more helpful in political terms than her initial determination to say “nothing,” since “bond[s]” of duty are bound to be weakened wherever they are presented as purely conventional, with little or no admixture of natural affection (1.1.92-93, 1.1.96-98).

Arguably, indeed, Lear’s furious insistence that Cordelia’s “plainness” is a form of “pride” is partly justified, for it is surely her dignified sense of her own virtue and fastidious distaste for anything that seems contrived, as well as her passionate nature, which prevent her from saying enough to facilitate Lear’s plan to justify his preference for her (1.1.129).[[8]](#endnote-8) The pride which Cordelia takes in her code of honour 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). Thus, the presentation of Cordelia introduces the idea that codes of nobility and honour are forms of sublimated self-love. Such codes generally reinforce passionate attachments and therefore social cohesion, but they may also cause the noble and passionate to bridle at the accommodations and hypocrisies which involvement in politics inevitably demands.

Moreover, given Lear’s own passion and nobility, evident in his preference for forthright characters like Kent, the fool and Cordelia herself, he too must find the contrived professions of love which the test is designed to elicit deeply uncongenial. His vacillation over the issue of whether to give Albany a greater territory than Cornwall shows that he too experiences a natural urge to prioritise his sincere thoughts and feelings over political considerations. It is likely, therefore, that Lear envies Cordelia’s freedom to express her feelings directly and to adhere straightforwardly to her habitual code of nobility, since it contrasts so sharply with the constraints which have been imposed on him by his own concern to secure the stability of the kingdom.[[9]](#endnote-9) The savagery of his anger may therefore be seen as a measure of the stress which his political role normally entails. Anticipating that both Burgundy and France would reject Cordelia after he has cut her off, Lear perhaps even takes a spiteful delight in showing her 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 message to Cordelia–which must be subconscious, since events show that he himself has not fully grasped the point–is that her noble code and the sincere relationships which she so treasures are much more reliant than she realises on the security provided by this authority, and on the benevolent manipulations by which he regulates potentially disruptive ambitions.

Lear’s nature is fundamentally passionate, as we may infer from the close relationship which he shares with Cordelia, not to mention with Kent and the fool (1.1.139-42). Indeed, the main purpose of his intricate plan is perhaps 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 to Cordelia’s “nursery” shows that he ultimately values his intimate attachments above his political concerns. Clearly, although politics may not in reality entirely lack intrinsic rewards (see below), it has impelled the king to engage in all sorts of artifices, which conflict with the sincerity that is an integral element of deep attachments, while seemingly being requited only by the insubstantial gratifications of “pomp” (3.4.33). At the same time, however, driven no doubt both by conventional piety and nobility as well as natural patriotism, Lear clearly feels too much responsibility for his kingdom simply to abdicate.

As he himself admits, Lear is thus furious with Cordelia above all for thwarting his attempt to find a means of prioritising his attachment to her which does not conflict with his patriotism and code of nobility (1.1.122-24). As the scene goes on, he begins to believe, perhaps, as noted, not entirely without justice, that she is indeed “untender” in her own “heart,” not because he doubts the strength of her attachment, but precisely because, unlike the king himself, she values her sense of her own passionate sincerity too much to make the contrived professions of love which would safeguard the kingdom, and consequently enable both of them to focus on the “joy” of their relationship (1.1.105-06, 1.1.38-41, 1.1.82).

The paradox which infuriates Lear so much, and which the opening scene is designed to expose, is that while constant attachments may only flourish where there is civic stability, the just rulers who are responsible for preserving that stability are themselves often unable to enjoy the relationships which they are likely to value above all else because of all the hypocrisies and accommodations which their role inevitably entails. It is significant that whereas Goneril and Regan strain to gain power and status, Cordelia, who, as her name implies, is primarily ruled by heartfelt attachments, remains completely unmoved by the prospect that she might “mar [her] fortunes” through her plain speech (1.1.94-95). Lear and Cordelia both understand that many of the rewards which political life offers are insubstantial compared to those that are provided by personal intimacy. Just as Lear’s primary aim is arguably to secure his own future with Cordelia, so Cordelia herself is much more concerned with her future husband, to whom she will give “half [her] love…care and duty,” than with the political situation (1.1.101-02).

Overall, therefore, the opening scene indicates firstly that noble lies are necessary in politics, and secondly that this necessity is bound to frustrate the majority of just rulers, whose concern for justice is both an expression of their instilled code of virtue and of their natural proclivity for trusting attachments.[[10]](#endnote-10) During the play Shakespeare expands on the uses and limitations of conventional beliefs in civic life, along with the ways in which they interact with natural attachments; the nature of the self-love which they are designed to control; the strengths and weaknesses of particular conventional codes; the dangers of enlightenment; [[11]](#endnote-11) and, perhaps most importantly of all, the issue of whether anyone is innately suited to the role of just ruler, given the inherently unnatural character of political life.

# The Nature of Self-Love

Ironically, the chaos precipitated by Lear’s sudden *volte-face* accidentally functions as a genuine love test, which exposes the nature of various groups of characters who might have been indistinguishable in the old regime. At the end of the opening scene, we are given an ominous glimpse of the overriding nature of Goneril’s ambition. As soon as Lear has surrendered his sovereignty, Goneril begins her campaign to marginalise him 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). It is important to note that the two elder sisters are so automatically self-loving that they could not be said to make a decision to prioritise their ambitions over filial affection or codes of duty. Goneril and Regan operate outside the arena of moral choice and responsibility, since they lack the natural ties from which moral codes are ultimately derived.[[12]](#endnote-12) Lear’s actual, unintentional love test reveals that Goneril neither loves Lear nor reveres his “authorities,” which in her view were simply “given away” when he surrendered his power to enforce them (1.3.16-18). Whereas the just characters normally see obedience to such “authorities” both as a moral duty and as a matter of passionate patriotism, as Kent’s continued allegiance to Lear’s lapsed “authority” indicates (1.4.23-30), Goneril is now shown to have been restrained only by her fear of the military force by which the king’s rule was ultimately underwritten: thus, her overriding priority in the first part of the play is to dismantle Lear’s retinue of a hundred knights (1.4.238-252, 1.4.322-27). Goneril and Regan represent an extreme of ambition, abstracted from the moderating influence of attachments (as far as it is possible to do so) and conventional codes in a manner calculated to expose the essential nature of self-love.

The fool implies that there is no point in remonstrating with Goneril and Regan, because their self-love is by no means “monst[rous]” or “disnatur’d,” as Lear assumes, but rather an integral element of the human psyche, which may easily become 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 its foster parents ever to become vulnerable to its predation (1.4.214-16). Far from arguing with Lear’s conviction that he was “so kind a father”–as the outspoken fool would certainly be perfectly capable of doing–he rebukes the king only for his naivety in expecting any more from Goneril than callous ingratitude (1.5.8-45). Goneril’s observation that Lear “always lov’d our sister most” cannot be taken as evidence of an emotional abuse in any way proportionate to the callousness of her subsequent actions; indeed, the purpose of her remark is not to analyse her relationship with her father, or even apparently to express resentment, but, with typical practicality, to use his abrupt rejection of Cordelia to justify her plan to side-line him on the grounds that he is losing his judgement (1.1.290-92). There is no sign in the play that the elder sisters have been mistreated or starved of affection, as is clearly the case with Edmund, or even that they resent their favoured sibling in the same way that Edmund clearly resents Edgar. Indeed, it is possible that Lear’s preference for Cordelia is, wholly or in part, an effect rather than a cause of his elder daughters’ unremitting focus on their own ambitions.

Being an irreducible element of the psyche, self-love is not in itself amenable to analysis, although we may perhaps infer from the example of the cuckoo that it is rooted in the survival instinct. The processes which lead some souls to enshrine it 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 hints that he is no believer in astrology, which, as we shall see, the play generally employs as a veiled analogy for religion: 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 to be literally imponderable (1.5.25-26).

Although conventional codes of morality and religion may effectively promote social cohesion and ostracise self-love (see below), in lawless times egregiously ambitious characters often have the advantage over their just counterparts, precisely because they are unencumbered by sympathetic ties or conventional principles. 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 perfectly capable of exploiting codes of piety and honour in order to further their ambitions (2.1.38-50, 1.4.201-14). The civil order therefore needs the protection of rulers like Lear, as he initially presents himself, and Edgar (see below), who are able to match the self-lovers’ unscrupulous willingness and cunning capacity to manipulate attachments and social convention. Although Lear differs radically from Edmund in the way that he defines human nature, he nevertheless resembles him in the opening scene in prioritising 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 the convention of primogeniture, 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). Using primogeniture as an example, Shakespeare suggests that established customs reinforce stability, but at the expense of imposing arbitrary rules which a just ruler must at times be prepared to manipulate.

It is clear from a fairly early point that, once the king has abandoned his original plan of succession, the ambitious characters were eventually bound to come into conflict in precisely the manner which Lear’s original plan was designed to forestall (3.1.19-26, 3.3.8-9). Overall, the play implicitly endorses Albany’s warning that self-love ultimately threatens the civic order itself: “Humanity must perforce prey on itself, like monsters of the deep” (4.2.49-50). Goneril shows how events might have proceeded at the end of the play, when she squabbles in public with Regan, whom she has just poisoned, over which one of them should “enjoy” Edmund, while reminding her husband, whom she has just been shown to have planned to murder, that she cannot be “arraign[ed],” since “the laws are mine, not thine” (5.3.66-81, 4.6.262-70, 5.3.159-60). Events prove that Lear’s authority, sustained as it was by a number of salutary conventions, and ultimately by military force, was always a relatively fragile edifice, which concealed the true nature of the threat posed by self-love even as it successfully kept it at bay (see below).

By contrast with Goneril and Regan, Edmund’s single-minded focus on his own ambitions is clearly provoked by the stigma of illegitimacy. His opening speeches introduce the idea that ‘enlightened’ philosophy may be both highly disruptive and deeply misleading: he enshrines “Nature,” by which he means self-love, as his “goddess,” and believes that sons would naturally supplant “aged tyranny, who sways, not as it hath power, but as it is suffer’d,” were they not duped into obedience by “the plague of custom” (1.2.1-4, 1.2.49-51). Edmund’s claim to be pursuing innate ambition absolutely 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). His treatment has indeed been radically inequitable: Gloucester has not only ensured that he “hath been out nine years,” but already determined that “away he shall again,” in order to conceal a “fault” which the duke “blush[es] to acknowledge” (1.1.290, 1.1.10-33). The duke has denied his illegitimate son 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 (1.1.139-42, 1.1.8-31). Thus, Shakespeare intimates that the philosophical intuitions of ‘free thinkers’ who, following Machiavelli, elevate self-love into a ruling principle may have simply been distorted by environments which thwart their natural urge to form attachments.

Edmund has perhaps been warped even more radically by emotional neglect than by his relatively low social status: he attempts earnestly but 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, although the play broadly supports the conventional codes which reinforce the established order, Shakespeare uses Edmund to show that they can also cause severe collateral damage on occasion. (Later in the play, Kent and Gloucester’s snobbish distaste for poor Tom provides a further illustration of this point: 5.3.209-13, 3.4.142). In this case, the support that these codes provide for the natural desire for lasting, monogamous relationships inevitably comes at the price of ostracising illegitimate offspring. The similarity between Edmund and Edgar’s names suggests that they share a common nature beneath the artificially imposed differences, and therefore that, under different circumstances, Edmund could have been as just as Edgar.

Ironically, “[un]bordered” self-love is ultimately shown to be self-destructive, since attachment is a basic human need, which cannot simply be ignored: “that nature which…will sliver and disbranch from her material sap, perforce must wither, and come to deadly use” (4.2.32-36). If Goneril and Regan were completely focused on gaining power, they would not have succumbed in such a humiliating fashion to Edmund’s charms, thus enabling him to manipulate them at will (5.1.55-65). Regan is desperate to wean her “sweet lord” away from her sister, while for her part, Goneril would “rather lose the battle than that sister should loosen him and me,” a possibility which “exasperates, makes [her] mad” (5.1.1-19). Although self-love and physical desire both undoubtedly play a part in this rivalry (4.2.26-28, 4.6.265-69, 5.1.10-13), there is no doubt that Goneril’s love at least goes beyond pride or lust, as Edmund comes to understand: “Yet Edmund was belov’d! The one the other poison’d for my sake, and after slew herself” (5.3.240-42). Goneril appears at first to represent the very abstract embodiment of thrusting ambition, but even she is utterly humbled, and ultimately destroyed by her passionate attachments.

This is not to say that Goneril is capable of forming sympathetic ties. Shakespeare implies that her attachments mingle with her desire for power, and of course her lust, in a manner that would ultimately have been self-destructive even if Edmund had survived the duel, since she is attracted to the very quality of spirited ambition which renders her lover untrustworthy, and, by the same token, repelled by the very sympathetic moderation which is the hallmark of lasting attachments: “O, the difference of man and man! To thee a woman’s services are due, a fool usurps my bed” (4.2.26-28). Thus, although self-love is undoubtedly natural, it lacks substantial, intrinsic rewards. Those who follow traditional moral codes may be more naïve than the self-lovers, but the codes ensure that they adopt a prudent restraint, which, paradoxically, might enable them to fulfil their deeper desires.

Edmund’s actions at the end of the play are incoherent in a somewhat similar way, despite his claim to be single-mindedly ambitious. Not only does he allow Edgar to manipulate him in to fighting a duel in a manner which reveals the extent to which he actually respects the arbitrary conventional hierarchy that he affects to despise (5.3.141-46; see below), but his belated recognition of his own desire to love and be “belov’d” apparently impels him to change course in the end, and endeavour to save the lives of Lear and Cordelia (5.3.240-52). As previously, his reductive account of his own nature, which has already been shown to be proud rather than accurate, fails to conceal his thwarted urge to form attachments: “Some good I mean to do, despite of my own nature” (5.3.244-45; compare 1.2.1-2). Edmund, is eventually able to prioritise his attachments over his self-love in a much more radical way than Goneril, since he has in fact always felt the power of sympathetic ties, if only through their absence. Overall, the portrayal of Goneril and Edmund in the final scene suggests that although self-love will naturally exercise an enormously disruptive influence at times, since it is bound to culminate in political ambition, it tends to be self-correcting in the end, since it will itself always be distorted by the gravitational pull of attachments, which form an equally fundamental element of the human psyche.[[13]](#endnote-13) The fates suffered by these three self-lovers allow Shakespeare to show that attachments may easily override self-love, even when they are not supported by the salutary conventions which they have helped to generate: as one critic puts it, “man must live by the moral law, which is the bond of love, or swiftly destroy himself.”[[14]](#endnote-14)

The play as a whole therefore appears to endorse the fool’s implication that, far from defaulting either to attachment or self-love under normal circumstances, human nature is permanently torn between these two incompatible and quite equally matched natural forces. The reactions of Lear’s hundred knights to his change of fortune presumably reflect the incidence of these motives in the population as a whole. Just under two thirds of these desert Lear after his confrontation with Goneril, no doubt 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 combination of affection and engrained respect for authority as we find in Kent, Gloucester and Albany (2.4.63-81, 3.7.16-20).

As with Lear’s knights, two thirds of the servants present at Gloucester’s blinding are primarily motivated by common self-regard. (This is not to say that the self-regard of the servants and the knights is anywhere near as extreme as the ambition of Goneril, Regan, Cornwall and Edmund, despite ultimately springing from the same root.) The two compliant servants “hold the chair” in which Gloucester is blinded, but subsequently admit that they are appalled by Cornwall’s actions, which they assume will be punished by the gods (3.7.67, 3.7.99-102). Hoping perhaps to avoid a similar fate themselves, they anoint the duke’s eyes and arrange for him to be escorted from the castle by poor Tom (3.7.67, 3.7.103-07). Although these efforts to help Gloucester, however prudently minimal, suggest that pious imperatives and residual sympathetic ties are often enough to moderate self-love to a degree, the servants’ overall complicity in the duke’s blinding indicates that these principles are not sufficiently powerful to prevent expedient conformity to tyranny. Nevertheless, one may infer from the servants’ guilt that in more stable times, these imperatives would encourage this stolid majority to conform peacefully to a just regime. The sixty-four or five knights have apparently served Lear faithfully in the past, since under the old regime their prudent sense of expedience never came into conflict with their codes of piety and honour.

By contrast with these ambivalently self-loving characters, but in parallel to the third of Lear’s knights who remain passionately loyal, one of the three servants intercedes forcefully to protect Gloucester from being blinded, not primarily out of sympathy for the victim, but, ironically, because of a long-standing attachment to Cornwall himself, who he assumes would regret his cruelty forever, both in this life and possibly in the next (3.7.72-82). The fact that this passionately loyal servant succeeds in killing his master, while the other two merely conform reluctantly to his tyrannical will, suggests that political history is forged by clashes between the great natural forces of self-love and attachment (both personal and patriotic), whilst the majority of the populace, who are moved by a combination of shallow attachments and conventional codes, practise an expedient, and at times uneasy, conformity to whatever regime is in place (3.7.95-98, 4.2.70-78).

Although Lear’s three daughters clearly reflect the same ratio of self-regard to dutiful and passionate attachment as the servants and the knights, Goneril and Regan are extreme cases, which, to repeat, are abstracted–as far as it is possible to do so–from the moderating influence of attachments and habitual decorum in a manner designed to expose the essential nature of self-love. Egregious narcissists of this sort seem to be relatively rare, although Edmund’s actions show that they may pose a disproportionate threat, precisely because they tend to be drawn to political life as the means to gain the greatest power and distinction.

# The Limitations of Conventional Beliefs

Using the example of astrology to disguise his exploration of religion, Shakespeare seems to endorse Edmund’s implication that piety may encourage passivity, since it might lead people to see themselves as “villains on necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion” (1.2.118-31). [[15]](#endnote-15) Gloucester assumes that some higher power is causing “love [to] cool”– “these late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good for us”–perhaps as a punishment for the hubris of materialistic natural philosophers: “Though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourg’d by the sequent effects” (1.2.103-09). (This is the first hint in the play that ‘enlightenment’ is naturally abhorrent to some of the just characters -see below for a fuller analysis of these points.) 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). He is so deeply immersed in these fatalistic ruminations that he wearily delegates the investigation of his son’s “villain[y]” to Edmund, almost in a parenthesis (1.2.112-17). As well as encouraging a fatalistic passivity, Gloucester’s credulity also renders him vulnerable to malign manipulation: Edmund intensifies his awed horror at Edgar’s alleged treachery simply by portraying the latter as “mumbling of wicked charms, conjuring the moon to stand’s auspicious mistress” (2.1.39-40).

Gloucester’s piety combines with secular codes of decorum and his naturally moderate disposition to instil in him a deep respect for the established hierarchy. He declares that the disguised Kent’s “fault is much” purely on the basis of the latter’s lack of conventional deference, but at the same time feels impelled to point out that the stocks are an inappropriately “low correction,” designed only for “basest…wretches,” by his fear that “the king must take it ill” to be “so slightly valued in his messenger” (2.2.140-47). He defers at first to the tyrannical Cornwall’s “fiery” and “unremovable” will, 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, 2.2.152-54). Later, he assumes that Cornwall and Regan will be bound by the conventions that he himself respects even as they are preparing to blind him, repeatedly appealing to the authority of the gods and the protocols of hospitality (3.7.30-41). Because he himself is regulated by sympathetic ties which are reinforced by a deep respect for established conventions, Gloucester is slow to recognise that Cornwall himself now feels free to ignore “the form of justice,” not to mention common compassion, after realising that his new-found “power” has put him beyond “control” (3.7.24-27).

In a similar way, Albany’s “milky gentleness,” combined with his trust in the “gods that we adore,” eventually induces him to defer reluctantly to Goneril’s determination to halve the number of Lear’s knights (1.4.290, 1.4.340-48). Just as Cornwall silences Gloucester with a peremptory phrase– “I’ll answer that”–so Albany’s early attempt to intercede on Lear’s behalf is easily overridden by Goneril: “Pray you, content” (2.2.147, 1.4.311-13). Like Lear himself (see below), Albany is slow to oppose Goneril’s ambition because he sees egregious self-love as a “monstrous” perversion, and can hardly believe that it could ever completely override love and codes of duty (5.3.160). He is deeply shocked when he does come to understand her true nature: “Thou changed and self-cover’d thing, for shame bemonster not thy feature” (4.2.62-63).

Like Cordelia and Lear, Albany is hampered in politics both by his passionate attachments and his conventional moral convictions. He is only persuaded “with much ado” to prioritise the defence of his kingdom against Cordelia’s troops above his dutiful and affectionate respect for Lear, and still remains “full of alteration and self-reproving” even on the eve of battle, since he cannot escape the thought that his actions fall well short of his habitual code of “honest[y]” (4.5.1-3, 5.1.3-4, 5.1.23-27). In the event, however, Albany presumably acknowledges that there was some truth in Goneril’s scornful portrayal of his initial stance as that of “a moral fool, [who] sits still and cries, ‘Alack, why does he so?” even as France “with plum’d helm [the] state begins to threat,” since he ultimately decides to defend his kingdom (4.2.56-59). As Kent indicates, no-one can be sure initially whether France is indeed attempting to reinstate “the old kind King” at his wife’s behest, or simply taking advantage of the divisions between the dukes to pursue a “deeper,” presumably more hostile and ambitious purpose (3.1.25-34).

Now that he wields sovereign power, Albany does not have the luxury of prioritising compassion for Lear and an honourable sense of duty in the manner of Gloucester and Kent, who are prepared to ally themselves with an invading force in order to protect their beloved master, just as Lear himself does not have the freedom to emulate the sincerity which Cordelia displays in the opening scene. (It is significant that if indeed Edgar engages at all in the final conflict, it is more likely that he takes Albany’s side, since he subsequently acts as the duke’s champion: 5.3.115-23.) The contrast between Albany’s vacillations and Goneril’s incisiveness suggests that the duke’s pious and honourable convictions often conflict with the reality of the political world. His prayer that the gods should “defend” Cordelia is ironically juxtaposed with the appearance of Lear holding her corpse, while his declaration at the end of the play that “all friends shall taste the wages of their virtue” is immediately refuted by the king’s final outburst of inconsolable grief (5.3.257-58, 5.3.303-305).[[16]](#endnote-16)

Although Kent’s conventional beliefs are bound to be useful in a just regime, since they reinforce his passionate loyalty (see below), they can also handicap him in ways which contrast almost schematically with the weaknesses of naturally moderate characters like Gloucester and Albany. Just as Cordelia’s moral principles impel her to refuse bluntly to cooperate with Lear’s plan in the opening scene, Kent’s piety and honour lead him to speak to the king in a direct and assertive manner which quickly proves to be counterproductive. The parallels between the two characters are underlined by the fact that Lear accuses both of them of displaying “pride,” and highlighted by Kent’s impudent appropriation of the very term which the king uses to excoriate Cordelia’s honesty to flaunt his own noble “plainness”: “To plainness honor’s bound, when majesty falls to folly” (1.1.148-49; compare 1.1.129). Kent cannot see that it was Cordelia’s own misplaced sincerity which led Lear to abort his plan, because he himself shares her rigid code of honour. Taken together, the actions of Kent and Cordelia in the opening scene suggest that, precisely because conventional codes of piety and honour work by sublimating self-love into loyal service, they may also encourage passionate individuals to take an overweening pride in their own virtuous constancy, which sometimes prevents them from delivering this service effectively.

Kent’s disguise as a faithful commoner might suggest that he embodies the intense loyalty which Lear’s rule has clearly elicited from a large section of the populace (1.4.27-35, 5.1.26-27). As with about a third of the population, according to the above argument, his passionate and dutiful respect for the king’s “authority” renders him vulnerable once Lear has renounced the position which allowed him to control self-lovers, ultimately through the threat of force. Kent feels free to criticise, not just Oswald, but Cornwall himself, because of his habitual assumption that they will eventually have to “do…respects” to “the grace and person of [his] master” (2.2.128-32). Having been placed in the stocks, however, Kent himself eventually acknowledges that his spirited intervention may have been counterproductive, admitting ruefully and percipiently that he showed “more man than wit” in challenging Oswald (2.4.42). In direct contrast to Gloucester, Kent’s characteristic assertiveness is actively 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 sees Cordelia’s proposed military intervention as a “miracle…” which might perhaps have been sent to compensate Lear for having forfeited “heaven’s benediction” (2.2.73-75, 2.2.160-66). Kent’s persecution at the hands of Cornwall hints that, while codes of piety and nobility certainly helped to sustain Lear’s authority (see below), they always did so at the expense of concealing its fragile and arbitrary nature.

As Kent himself acknowledges, there is some truth in Oswald’s remark that he attacked him in their first encounter merely in order to “put upon him such a deal of man that worthied him, got praises of the King” (2.2.120-21, see also 2.4.42). In his confrontation with Oswald Kent does indeed show a haughty pride in his own superior “plainness;” a term which is again used repeatedly at this point in the play (2.2.92-113). The irony of Kent “profess[ing] to be no less than [he] seem[s],” namely an “honest” and “plain” servant who can “deliver a plain message bluntly,” while all the time carefully maintaining a disguise, points again to the fact that proud “plainness” is not necessarily an asset in the political sphere (1.4.10-35).

In sum, although Kent undoubtedly begins to learn from his experiences, he is encouraged by a combination of passionate attachment and sublimated pride to confront self-love in a direct manner which, although courageous and indeed no doubt generally effective under the old regime, is at best counterproductive and at worst actively dangerous, once Lear has surrendered his sovereign power. Although Kent’s imprudence is diametrically contrasted with the passivity of the naturally moderate Gloucester, they are both shown to be vulnerable to tyrannical ambition for the same reason, namely, that they see the conventional codes of piety and honour to which they adhere as entirely natural.

Lear’s own response to his beleaguered situation combines natural passion and conventional convictions in a similar manner to Kent and with similar results. As well as blaming himself bitterly 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, 1.5.24), Lear is naturally shocked and 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). Unlike Edmund, who, as we have seen, identifies self-love as the primary law of nature, Lear expects “Nature” to instil gratitude, since he knows this sentiment to be one of the essential elements of the intimate attachments which fulfil his own deepest needs (1.4.275; contrast 1.2.1-6). Thus, like Kent, Gloucester and Albany, Lear derives a normative code partly from the innate imperatives of love, which he assumes are universally understood, and therefore ignored only on rare occasions at the expense of perverting nature.

Just as with Kent, however, codes of piety and honour reinforce Lear’s natural indignation: “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). In contrast with Edmund, who feels entirely responsible for his own fate, Lear is partly inclined to view “Nature” literally as a “goddess” rather than merely as a convenient personification: he prays that she might arrange for any child of Goneril’s to prove “a disnatur’d torment to her” (1.4.275-89; compare the analysis of 1.2.1-2 above). This ambiguity suggests again that the tendency of the just characters to view self-love as unnatural is supported by conventional beliefs which merge indistinguishably with imperatives derived directly from passionate attachments. Lear’s professed hope that Regan at least will “know the offices of nature, bond of childhood, effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude” is typical of such characters in the way that it lumps together passionate appeals to a “nature” which he supposes to be more “tender-hefted” than Goneril’s, with a reliance on his daughter’s conventional “courtesy” and dutiful sense that she owes him “dues” (2.4.177-81). Normally, the imperatives of love and those of conventional piety and morality combine to conceal or marginalise the natural harshness of self-love, as is indicated by the way in which, in the face of all the evidence, Lear manages to preserve his hope that Regan both loves and respects him almost to the end of their long conversation in act 2 scene 4.

Lear’s sense that he has lost his identity– “This is not Lear”–as a result of Goneril’s disrespect reflects his lack of understanding of the superficial and arbitrary nature of his own “marks of sovereignty” and of the deference which they have attracted (1.4.226-34). His ongoing confidence in his own authority, which is the main factor that prevents him from taking the full measure of his parlous situation, is illustrated by his mistaken assumption 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 expectation that he will be obeyed automatically whenever he “commands, tends service” (2.4.12-27, 2.4.102). He is shocked and ultimately maddened by Goneril and Regan’s behaviour, partly because the dynamics of authority and deference, which are in fact primarily conventional, have become naturalised in his mind by habit, and perhaps indeed by the doctrine of divine right (see the analysis of 4.6.82-87 below). Shakespeare uses this situation to remind the audience that although the whole edifice of a just society is ultimately sustained by an arbitrary hierarchy which controls military force, this point is usually obscured precisely by the conventional codes which support social cohesion. Because of his habituation to these codes, Lear cannot understand that the only salient point now is that he lacks the military power to take “revenges” on Goneril and Regan, or on other ambitious self-lovers like Edmund: “I will do such things–what they are yet I know not, but they shall be the terrors of the earth” (2.4.279-82).

There are signs that Albany, who, despite his “milky” moderation and piety, ultimately proves himself to be eminently capable of resisting Goneril (4.2.29-67, 5.3.155-58)–could have been a powerful ally from the start, if Lear had not been too distracted by his pious curses, his shame that Goneril has the “power to shake [his] manhood” by reducing him to tears, and finally his hope that Regan might allow him to resume his royal “shape,” to sue for the duke’s support, as he initially intended to do (1.4.295-310). Although Lear asks Albany to “speak” in regard to the disbanding of his knights, having guessed that he is “guiltless,” he does not in the event give him time to do so, or indeed even explain “what’s the matter” (1.4.257-72, 1.4.295). Albany perhaps would not have consented to the disbanding of Lear’s knights if he had been given a chance to examine both sides of the case, since his initial instinct is that Goneril “may fear too far” (1.4.328). Although, as noted, Albany too is initially hampered in his dealings with his unscrupulous wife both by decorous codes and an affectionate nature, the pious and magnanimous duke is certainly prepared to dispute the issue with her, even at the start of the play: “I cannot be so partial, Goneril, to the great love I bear you…” (1.4.310-13). However, Lear’s abrupt departure leaves his wife free to present the king’s erratic behaviour and violent curses simply as evidence of his “dotage”: “Do you mark that?” (1.4.326-27, 1.4.310). (Needless to say, Goneril ensures that Albany is absent when she and Regan finally divest Lear of all his knights in act 2, scene 4.) Thus, Lear’s habitual sense of his own dignity, both as a monarch and a patriarch, prevents him from responding prudently to Goneril’s incursions.

Lear resembles most of the just characters in the play in combining a loving nature with traditional codes of duty and piety, which generally promote social cohesion. As we saw in the first section, however, he precipitates the chaotic events of the play partly because he himself ascribes to the convictions which prevent Cordelia from facilitating his plan. One may infer from this point that in an ideal world rulers should themselves be sufficiently thoughtful to dispense with such convictions, since they are bound to compromise their capacity to promulgate the noble lies which are needed to restrain self-love. Moreover, the events which follow Lear’s virtual abdication show that in less stable times these conventional codes of behaviour hamper subjects as well as rulers: precisely because the codes naturalise the political order, while presenting self-love as a freakish monstrosity, they may encourage passivity and fatalism on the one hand, and on the other, overconfident self-assertion. Furthermore, as noted above, Edmund’s explosive resentment reflects the collateral damage which these conventions may regularly cause.

# The Uses of Conventional Beliefs

I would argue that the stormy night into which Lear and his small company are forced to venture represents an original state of nature, wherein humanity is fully exposed to the turbulence of self-love, which, as the fool’s song suggests, is bound to be as insistently disruptive as “the wind and the rain” (3.2.74-77; see below). The hovel where the company eventually finds shelter is a fitting symbol for the constructions which, with all the caveats outlined in the previous section, nevertheless ultimately serve to protect humanity from the harsher elements of human nature. Shakespeare uses the scenes on the heath to trace the process by which civil societies emerge, with the aid of a political elite who, themselves often driven by codes of piety and nobility as well as by natural patriotism, strive to control self-love both by imposing the rule of law and by promoting the salutary beliefs which aid social cohesion. To achieve these aims it was necessary to set the play in primitive times, or what Schlegel calls “a dreary and barbarous age.”[[17]](#endnote-17)

Contra Hobbes and the Enlightenment thinkers who followed him, Shakespeare goes some way towards endorsing Gloucester’s view that civil society stands or falls by natural bonds, whether of romantic love, friendship, kinship or patriotic loyalty: “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” (1.2.106-09). All the characters apart from Goneril, Regan and Cornwall can indeed be said to be swayed to some degree by this “bias of nature,” as Gloucester puts it (1.2.111). Even the apparent exception of Edmund proves the general rule, since his anger is catalysed precisely by the baulking of his desire for “a secure “bond…’twixt father and son,” and, if the above argument is correct, eventually mollified by the knowledge that he was, after all, “belov’d” (5.3.240).[[18]](#endnote-18)

Shakespeare implies that political regimes are originally seeded by small domestic groups, bound together by sympathetic ties and led by patriarchs who eventually might become monarchs. Thus, Lear’s attachments lead him to progress naturally from recognising that he himself is cold to attempting to find shelter for the fool and Kent– “Come, your hovel. Poor Fool and knave, I have one part in my heart that’s sorry yet for thee”–and from there to a warm-hearted recognition of the need to redistribute the elite’s “superflux” of wealth to “houseless heads” (3.2.68-73, 3.4.26-35). Although, as he now admits, his elevated status has almost inevitably distracted him somewhat from his compassionate patriotism– “O, I have ta’en too little care of this! Take physic pomp, expose thyself to feel what wretches feel”–we may infer from the original plan for succession that his underlying political motive has always been to protect the populace by ensuring that the rule of law is maintained (3.4.32-34). In the state of nature, where “pomp” is stripped away, the king’s natural compassion is as clearly exposed as the callousness of the self-lovers.

However, the process by which Lear and his small company eventually secure shelter also implies that these burgeoning societies inevitably come to rely on conventions of authority and deference, as a consequence of the need to shield the circle of their attachments from the turbulence of self-love. Without Gloucester’s authority, which quickly allows him to commandeer the hovel, Lear could only have protected his beloved fool by relying on Kent’s determination to “force [the] scanted courtesy” of the “hard house” which has previously turned the company away (3.2.62-67, 3.4.153, 3.4.174). Whereas Kent’s effective use of force–he returns having secured the house (3.4.1-5)–might remind us that the authority of rulers must surely be originally defended and subsequently underwritten by military power, Gloucester’s intervention, which ultimately renders Kent’s initiative redundant, shows that this ugly fact can normally be glossed over, once the social order has been formed. At this point, the established hierarchy can usually override self-love without the need for violence by invoking conventional deference. Shakespeare implies that civilised life relies on such a hierarchy: the house that Gloucester procures has “fire and food ready” (3.4.153).

If houses represent the civil order itself, then it is significant that one purpose of Lear’s scheme to provide homes for “houseless heads” would be to “show the heavens more just” than they actually are (3.4.28-36). This order is rooted in natural attachment, just as Gloucester believes, but established, salutary conventions are also needed in order to facilitate the creation of a small enclave of peace and justice. Within this enclave, civil order is supported by the salutary belief that the cosmos is regulated by a benevolent hierarchy, of which the king’s authority is merely one aspect. The crucial role that faith in just gods may play in reinforcing confidence in secular laws is indicated when Lear extends his fulminations against Goneril and Regan to include all “wretch[es]” who have committed “undivulged crimes,” whom he hopes will “tremble” when they hear the storm and “cry…grace” (3.2.49-59).

Like houses, such beliefs both ward off and partially conceal the harshness of nature, since they deter self-love at the expense of presenting it as a monstrous aberration. Lear recognises the need for concealment when he suggests that Tom and he conduct their philosophical investigations in private: he knows that it might be disruptive to ask “what is the cause of thunder,” since this question implicitly casts doubt on the existence of the divine sanctions which he himself has previously figured in conventional fashion as “all-shaking thunder” (3.4.154-60; see 3.2.6-9). Although religion is a uniquely effective way of naturalising an artificial political order, the bogus love test is in fact the play’s central image for this process. The love test resembles Lear’s plan to “show the heavens more just,” in that it is designed to reinforce this order by mendaciously portraying it as entirely sustained by a great chain of spontaneous love.

The king’s contorted and contradictory meditations on the storm confirm that he too has always been sustained by a deep faith in the justice of the gods. His first instinct is to rationalise the indiscriminate lashings of the storm as a divine scourge of “ingrateful man” (3.2.1-9). Since he cannot, however, deny that churches are being “drench’d” along with everything else, and that his own “old and white” head is also in danger of being “singe[d],” he goes on to speculate desperately that the “rain, wind, thunder, fire” are in fact acting as “servile ministers” to his “pernicious daughters,” conducting “high engender’d battles” against those who are largely innocent (3.2.14-24). The agonised tone of these meditations, which of course eventually drive him insane, suggests that it is vital for men of Lear’s temperament to find a way of denying that they are at times “more sinn’d against than sinning,” and to retain their reassuring sense that the harshness of nature, including human callousness, is a punishment administered by “the great gods” for “undivulged crimes unwhipt of justice” (3.2.49-60).[[19]](#endnote-19)

Although Lear’s insistence on staying out in the storm may indicate that he is better equipped to confront the harshness of nature than Kent or Gloucester (see below), he does so in order to “shun” the inner tumult caused by “ponder[ing] on things would hurt me more” (3.4.6-25). In other words, 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. Lear certainly lingers in the storm in order to discuss the nature of man and the cause of thunder with Edgar in a quasi-philosophical manner, but, as we shall see, rather than exploring these issues in a spirit of open-minded curiosity, he is actually looking to reinforce his flagging faith in divine providence (3.4.46-176).

At the end of the play, Lear’s repeated denials that Cordelia is dead alternate with a sporadic recognition that she will “come no more, never, never, never, never, never,” and an indirect acknowledgement that human lives and deaths have no more significance than those of “a dog, a horse, a rat” (5.3.262-64, 5.3.266-68, 5.3.272-74, 5.3.306-12). One may infer from these remarks, and from the fact that Lear now makes no reference to an afterlife, that Cordelia’s arbitrary death has finally stripped him of the belief in divine providence which the sensitive Edgar has sought to preserve (see below, and contrast, for instance, 4.7.44-48).[[20]](#endnote-20) Like Gloucester and Kent (see below), he cannot in the end bear to be fully exposed to “the rack of this tough world” (5.3.314-16). Shakespeare implicitly endorses Edgar’s effort to induce Lear to “look up,” presumably to the gods, rather than repeatedly “look[ing]” at Cordelia’s lifeless body (5.3.311-14). As we shall see, the shrewd Edgar sees that it is better for characters like Lear and Gloucester to remain blind than to torture themselves in this way.

We may infer from the above that most just rulers need the gods, and perhaps a belief in the afterlife, as much as their subjects, in order to enable them to conceive of the arbitrary harshness of nature as in some way just. Lear is perhaps typical of such rulers in that he is an intermediate character in intellectual terms, whose world view is circumscribed by the very conventional beliefs which his position requires him to manipulate. The very stubbornness with which he adheres to these beliefs–until he is finally overwhelmed by Cordelia’s death–and the desperation which he shows when he feels that they are under threat, are signs that they played an integral role in helping him to maintain his long and successful reign.

Lear is sustained, not only by his faith that secular justice is underwritten by divine providence, but by the pride which he habitually takes in the noble and spirited virtue that he displays as monarch and patriarch. It is precisely this combination of motives which reinforces his determination to resist Goneril and Regan’s efforts to induce him to stay with them as a private citizen and to relinquish his retinue of knights. Although, as noted, he is beginning to worry that the gods may have callously “stir[red] these daughters’ hearts against their father,” he nevertheless still asks them to enable him to respond to their cruelty with “noble anger” (2.4.272-78). Despite having half a mind at times to show humble “patience” and resign himself to being merely a “poor old man, as full of grief as age, wretched in both,” his piety, combined with his habitual abhorrence of “women’s weapons, water-drops,” ultimately drives him to defy Regan’s advice that, “being weak,” he should “seem so,” and instead to threaten nameless “revenges,” which he hopes will be “the terrors of the earth” (2.4.271-84, 1.4.296-99, 2.4.201).

It is fortunate indeed, I would argue, that Lear does not agree to his daughters’ proposal that he should humbly apologise and henceforth “be rul’d and led” by them, for although Goneril and Regan may declare initially that they would have no reason not to “receive him gladly,” if he abandoned his “follower[s]” and made no attempt to “manage those authorities that he hath given away,” the celerity with which they subsequently “seek his death” suggests that in the end they would not have spared him and “all that offer to defend him,” even if he had settled down to live with them as a private citizen in the manner which both they and the fool advise, since he could always have served as a focus of resistance to their own regimes (2.4.146-56, 2.4.292-93, 1.3.16-18, 3.4.162-63, 3.6.88-97). Lear is in fact in grave danger when he does eventually fall into his daughters’ hands, since, as Edmund puts it, his “title” has “charms” “to pluck the common bosom on his side” (5.3.45-54). Goneril and Regan would surely have agreed with Edmund that the best way to “defend” their “state” is to show their father no mercy, just as they come to see that it was “great ignorance…to let [Gloucester] live; where he arrives he moves all hearts against us” (5.1.65-69, 4.5.8-14).

Thus, far from valuing the humble and patient Lear who emerges in the second half of the play,[[21]](#endnote-21) Shakespeare implicitly endorses the king’s original, noble sense that it would not “become…the house” to sue Goneril for forgiveness and “raiment, bed and food,” as if he were merely a private individual; it is in fact his proud and spirited anger, rooted in natural passion, but encouraged by his conventional piety and nobility, which preserves his life, since it is this that drives him out into the stormy night, where he evades capture and execution (2.4.153-56). Under different circumstances, this spiritedness would certainly have driven Lear to defend his regime on the battle-field, as the play suggests he has done countless times before (see the analysis of 4.6.87-92 below).

Lear is aided by a group of characters who illustrate the nature of the passionate and dutiful loyalty which reinforces just regimes. Kent is moved by the same combination of attachment and convention that motivates Gloucester and Albany, although, like his master, he is naturally a much more assertive character (see above). It must be said first that Kent’s courageous intervention at the start of the play reflects a deep natural 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 of course later on in the play makes good her claim to provide a level of “care and duty” commensurate with her “love,” Kent understands that the satisfactions of deep attachments are founded on the gratitude and trust which are generated by self-denying service: “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” (1.1.213-261, 1.1.100-02, 1.4.4-7). At the end of the play, he dissuades Edgar from attempting to revive Lear in the compassionate hope that the king’s heart will “break,” and then, having refused the crown, declares that he sees no point in living on without his ruling passion: “My master calls me” (5.3.3.312-323). (It is the measure of Kent’s sympathetic connection with Lear that it enables him, uniquely in the play, to confront and welcome a harsh truth, namely that the king is dead, which the robust and percipient Edgar denies.)

Kent’s initial willingness to risk banishment is thus typical of a life “held but as a pawn to wage against [Lear’s] enemies;” one which he “never fear’d to lose,” the king’s “safety being motive” (1.1.155-81). Kent’s passionate and utterly self-denying determination to protect the king is particularly evident in the storm scenes (3.2.60-67, 3.4.1-5, 3.4.22, 3.4.125, 3.4.156, 3.4.175, 3.6.4-5, 3.6.33-34, 3.6.58-59, 3.6.82, 3.6.97-101). Overall, he can therefore be classed among the not inconsiderable number of characters in the play who naturally prioritise their attachments, both personal and patriotic, over their self-love; a list which of course includes Lear himself, who at the start of the play also wishes to surrender the crown in order to focus on his “joy” (1.1.82).

However, although Kent’s intervention in the opening scene shows that his love goes well beyond dutiful “allegiance,” he is able to serve Lear with such robust loyalty, albeit with the naivety noted in the section above, precisely because he also relies on the support of a set of artificial convictions (1.1.167). He has certainly “lov’d [Lear] as a father,” but he has also “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). In direct contrast to Goneril, Kent offers Lear “service” and “call[s] [him] master” partly because he continues to see “authority” in his “countenance,” even after the king has forfeited all means of compelling obedience (compare 1.3.16-18 and 1.4.23-30). His insistence on addressing Lear as “your Grace” on the heath reminds us of the robustness of this instilled respect, just as the latter’s sardonic response, “What’s he?” implies that the king is beginning to strip away these conventions (3.4.125-26; see below for Lear’s ‘enlightenment’).

Kent’s sense of duty is underwritten by his piety: he prays that “the gods” will take Cordelia “to their dear shelter,” recognising that she “justly think[s],” and “fear[s] judgment” (1.1.182-83; see also 1.4.16-17, 3.6.5). Like Gloucester, Kent expresses a belief that the callousness of self-love must in some way stem from “the stars above us, [which] govern our conditions,” having clearly been moved by the gentleman’s pious description of Cordelia shaking “holy water from her heavenly eyes” (4.3.29-35). His passionate loyalty is thus reinforced not only by his habitual, proud sense of his own nobility, as noted in the section above, but by his belief that offences against the natural imperatives of love are perverse or monstrous aberrations inspired by a malign supernatural influence.

Similarly, when Gloucester helps Lear at enormous personal risk, having been ordered not to “sustain him” in any way, he is motivated not only by natural pity and a passionate revulsion against Cornwall and Regan’s “unnatural” callousness, but by a habitual respect for the hierarchy over which “the King my old master” has presided (3.3.1-19). He protects Lear sturdily, not merely out of a natural sympathy for his “poor old heart,” but because the king is “anointed” (3.7.56-66). Gloucester may be unassertive by nature, but his code of duty ultimately proves to be as robust as Kent’s: “my duty cannot suffer t’obey in all your daughters’ hard commands” (3.4.148-53). His astrological theories are used to hint that conventional piety may reinforce just regimes by presenting them as reflecting an overarching, supernatural order. If higher powers occasionally cause “love [to] cool,” then they are presumably imagined as working to sustain attachments the rest of the time (1.2.103-09). Gloucester is himself sustained later in his brave resistance to Cornwall by his faith in “the kind gods,” and his hope that they will deliver a “winged vengeance” (3.7.35, 3.7.92, 3.7.66). As we shall see in a later section, Gloucester resembles Lear in that his faith in the justice of the gods is absolutely vital to his well-being. Overall, he and Kent embody the robust combination of passionate ties and conventional beliefs which has doubtless formed the foundation of Lear’s long and just rule.

Albany also belongs with the large group of characters whose strong natural attachments are supported by conventional conceptions of duty[[22]](#endnote-22): his “reverence” for Lear as “a father and a gracious aged man” merges imperceptibly with his compassion and his spontaneous gratitude to the king for having “benefited” him with the title of “prince” (4.2.41-45). He hopes that the gods will send “visible spirits…to tame these vild offenses,” and later sees the deaths of Cornwall, Goneril and Regan as representing the “judgment of the heavens, that makes us tremble,” since it “our nether crimes so speedily can venge,” while his passionate sympathy for Cordelia expresses itself as a prayer that the gods should “defend” her (4.2.46-47, 5.3.232, 4.2.78-80, 5.3.257). As with Gloucester and Kent, this combination of natural and conventional motives reinforces Albany’s loyal sense of duty and determination to see justice done wherever possible (5.3.297-305).

If the storm on the heath represents the natural harshness of self-love, Kent’s ultimate inability to confront this harshness, illustrated at the end of the play by the way in which “the strings of his life began to crack” as he told “the most piteous tale of Lear and him,” is implicitly reflected in his repeated, urgent injunctions to the king to enter the hovel which he has just commandeered, on the grounds that “man’s nature cannot carry th’ affliction nor the fear” of the storm, and that “the tyranny of the open night’s too rough for nature to endure” (5.3.216-18, 3.2.48-49, 3.2.60-67, 3.4.1-5, 3.4.22; see also 4.7.95-96).

By exposing the grave consequences of enlightenment, the play suggests that the opinions which blind the just characters to the arbitrary harshness of nature are vital for their well-being. The moderate Albany survives the events of the play only by turning away from their harshness: at the end of the play, he begs Edgar to “hold it in” if he has more to tell, since he is already “almost ready to dissolve” after hearing about Gloucester’s death (5.3.203-05).

Gloucester himself, who, having lost his faith in the justice of the gods, can only be prevented from ending his own life by Edgar’s fraudulent ‘proof’ of divine intervention (see below), is as insistent as Kent that the company should find shelter from the storm (3.4.148-53, 3.4.170-4). His casual response to Edgar’s unusually frank remark that “ripeness is all,” which implies that nothing, perhaps not even the will of the gods, should be valued above natural fulfilment, suggests that the pious duke could never be supported by philosophical thought: “And that’s true too” (5.2.8-11). [[23]](#endnote-23) The manner of Gloucester’s demise might remind us again of his need for the gods: when Edgar, perhaps in a moment of weakness, finally tells him the full truth of their “pilgrimage” “from first to last,” no doubt including a sober account of the subterfuge by which he restored his father’s faith, the confession immediately causes the duke’s “flaw’d” and “weak” heart to “burst,” partly from “joy,” but also from “grief,” for Edgar has restored the possibility that the gods might be unjust (5.3.196-200). Free-thinking is anathema to Gloucester: he believes that “the wisdom of nature [which] can reason it thus and thus,” will be “scourg’d” for its hubristic presumption (1.2.104-06).

Lear’s imaginary trial of his daughters could be seen as the last, desperate flowering of the noble, dignified self-assertion which seems to have characterised the king throughout his long and just reign (see below). As well as offering him personal reassurance, his barely retained faith in the justice of the gods is potentially politically useful, since it is presumably a factor in his determination to bring Goneril and Regan to trial. I would argue that Lear’s “arraign[ment]” of his daughters, which of course audiences are encouraged to dismiss as completely deluded, is in fact covertly used to explore the underlying nature of legal institutions (3.6.20-54). This is a crucial section of the play, since the principal task of a just ruler is arguably to uphold the rule of law. Indeed, the progression from the state of nature to civil order which Shakespeare seems to outline in the scenes on the heath could be said to culminate in this imaginary trial. Lear’s suit is typical of legal processes in that it sublimates the natural vengefulness which in fact remains his underlying motive into a measured and organised effort to deliver retribution: it is significant that even in his current state of turmoil, the king separates the judiciary from the executive, appointing a stranger as a principal judge, while himself merely adopting the role of plaintiff (3.6.36-48). In Lear’s mind he could actually be said to be engaging in a dignified and moderate public process–he addresses what he imagines to be an “honorable assembly”–in a manner which, under normal circumstances, would be calculated to reinforce respect for the law (3.6.47).

If the symbolic interpretation of houses and storms given above is correct, then the very fact that Lear waits to “arraign” his daughters until he is in the well-appointed house procured by Gloucester, shielded from the stormy night, may be seen as insinuating that the law itself is based on a set of useful illusions. Not only is Lear’s faith in the law reinforced by his piety, but the arbitrary nature of his decision to appoint Tom and the fool to preside at the court might remind us that the wisdom of judges is not always commensurate with their power (3.6.36-39). Most crucially, Shakespeare also suggests that the very legal processes which are designed to control self-love must necessarily disguise its true nature. As we have seen, the portrayal of Goneril and Regan seems to support the fool’s implication that it makes no more sense to hold extreme self-lovers responsible for their actions, as if they were free moral agents, than it does for Lear to inveigh against the storm, since the attachments upon which conventional moral codes are ultimately founded are, in the case of Lear’s elder daughters, so radically stunted as to render them automatically and unthinkingly self-regarding. I would argue that this point is conveyed symbolically here by the fact that the offenders whom Lear thinks that he is trying are in fact merely “join-stool[s]” (3.6.52). Lear’s determination to give his daughters a fair trial is therefore based on a fantasy in a deeper sense than the one that is immediately obvious, since, as he begins to realise at this point, Goneril and Regan are naturally “warp’d,” just like the wood which was originally used to construct the stools (3.6.53-54).

Thus, if pursued in a thoroughly philosophical manner, the plan that Lear forms after experiencing this epiphany to “anatomize Regan; see what breeds about her heart,” in order to understand “the cause in nature that make[s] these hard hearts,” would have ultimately led him to see that his elder daughters are simply natural hazards, who must be destroyed or disabled in the same manner as one would a “wolf,” to use the fool’s image (3.6.76-78, see 3.6.18-19). Arguably, however, the law may only continue to provide the deterrents which are needed to protect society from the savagery of self-love if this truth remains hidden, since legal processes are bound to be driven primarily by a desire to deliver retribution, a motive which assumes that moral responsibility is intrinsic to the human condition.

Overall, the scenes on the heath show that, although civil society is rooted in sympathetic attachments, it must rely on an artificial hierarchy to protect these attachments from the disruptive influence of self-love. Conventional codes of piety and nobility reinforce the compassion and spirited self-assertion of the rulers who emerge in response to this need, while at the same time inculcating principles of dutiful deference in the populace at large. These codes support social cohesion, most notably by presenting secular authority as mirroring a divine order. Thus, the very process of controlling self-love naturally involves disguising its harshness, as when law courts attribute moral responsibility to those who are no freer to emulate the just characters than “warp’d” stools. The dissemination and preservation of these salutary conventions are facilitated by the fact that most passionate and just individuals are naturally disposed to avoid “look[ing]” at the arbitrary harshness of the universe, as is indicated by the anguish which they feel when they are forced to do so.

# The Natural Ruler

Lear’s effective abdication at the start of the play, along with Kent and Albany’s refusal of the crown at the end, might suggest that political engagement is incompatible with personal fulfilment.[[24]](#endnote-24) We may infer that, despite his innately sympathetic nature, Lear can only have been induced to rule for so long by his habitual nobility and piety, since it is clear from the opening scene that he naturally prefers trusting personal attachments to the hypocritical displays of political life. Ironically, his position has prevented him from devoting himself fully to his personal “joy,” even as it enables him to play a vital role in maintaining the stable civic order which frees his subjects to pursue their own lasting attachments. It is this imbalance which sparks the resentment which Lear feels when Cordelia prioritises sincere feeling over the accommodations which politics inevitably demands.

However, I would argue that the philosophical Edgar is used to show that truly thoughtful and passionate individuals may nevertheless actively wish to engage in politics, and, moreover, that they may do so in a particularly effective way, since they understand the need for noble lies and the strategies by which they may be preserved and disseminated. In the state of nature which Lear’s abdication precipitates, Edgar quickly emerges as a natural ruler, by virtue both of his sympathetic disposition and his shrewd intelligence. Shakespeare implies that the process by which civil order is established in Britain is not complete until the philosophical Edgar tacitly accepts Albany’s offer of the crown at the end of the play (5.3.320-27; see below). Edgar, that is, the actual Anglo-Saxon king of that name, was generally held up as a model for successive monarchs in Shakespeare’s time in the way that he united and civilised a previously barbarous nation. Flahiff argues that “the prospects for Lear’s kingdom are contained in Edgar’s name,” as surely as if he had been called Arthur.[[25]](#endnote-25) Certainly, Lear has temporarily united the country, but, as the opening scene reveals, this union is based on an uneasy balance of power, whereas at the end of the play Edgar is given the chance to impose the laws and disseminate the conventions upon which the whole nation will be founded. From one point of view, *King Lear* can therefore be seen as the first of the history plays.

Unlike the other just characters, Edgar resists the unjust characters effectively, because he too is radically emancipated from conventional opinion. If Edmund raises the subject of astrology with his brother in the hope that the latter might be induced to resign himself fatalistically to his father’s sudden hostility, he must be disappointed by Edgar’s incredulous response (1.2.136-51). Even as Edmund dismisses Edgar as hopelessly naïve, he is shrewd enough to draw a careful 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 naturally “credulous,” as Edmund implicitly acknowledges here, and although he is initially vulnerable to his brother’s ploys, purely because such schemes are so alien to his passionate nature, he quickly shows himself to be much more astute and resilient than his pious father. In contrast to the fatalistic Gloucester, he immediately finds a mundane and entirely accurate explanation for his predicament, which allows him to react 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).

Unlike Lear, Kent and Gloucester, Edgar “embrace[s]” the storm, signifying his ability to accept fully and confront the innate harshness of self-love, “welcom[ing]” his torments simply because he has apparently already reached the lowest point possible (4.1.1-9). After the shock of seeing his disfigured father for the first time, even he has a momentary urge to pray to the gods, but having quickly composed himself, he falls back on his own resources in characteristic fashion (4.1.25-28). By contrast to Gloucester, Edgar has a wiry robustness which is the mark of a particularly passionate and intelligent nature. The fact that he is moved more deeply by Gloucester’s condition than his own suggests that he derives this strength from his attachments rather than simply from his instinct for survival (4.1.10-12, 4.1.25-28). [[26]](#endnote-26) It is significant that in the third of Edgar’s four incarnations, as the poor peasant who sees Gloucester’s miraculous preservation, he describes himself as “by the art of known and feeling sorrows…pregnant to good pity” (4.6.222-23).[[27]](#endnote-27) Thus, although Shakespeare adopts Plato’s distinction between the few who are sustained entirely by natural desire and the many who are partly or wholly reliant on convention, he disagrees with his intuitions regarding the ultimate good: Edgar is deeply thoughtful, but he is ultimately led by his attachments rather than his desire for knowledge.[[28]](#endnote-28)

After admitting that his “tears begin to take [Lear’s] part so much, they mar my counterfeiting,” Edgar goes on to reflect on the personal benefits which accrue to those who are capable of feeling intense sympathetic concern:

“When we our betters see bearing our woes,

We scarcely think our miseries our foes.

Who alone suffers, suffers most i’ th’ mind,

Leaving free things and happy shows behind,

But then the mind much sufferance does o’erskip,

When grief hath mates, and bearing fellowship.”

(3.6.102-07, see also 3.6.60, 3.6.57)

Those who are regulated by a truly passionate desire to form sympathetic connections may well be touched by the suffering even of relative strangers, albeit no doubt less intensely than that of friends and family. (Edgar responds to Lear simply as a fellow human being, without mentioning that he is the king’s godson -2.1.91). They can make their own pain “light and portable” by establishing such connections, and, furthermore, because attachments are intrinsically fulfilling, gain permanent access to “free things and happy shows.”

Shakespeare uses this important soliloquy to suggest that the few who are able to align themselves with their own deeper needs naturally exploit every opportunity to develop a sense of compassionate solidarity with their fellow men. It is highly significant that in Edgar’s case, this impulse seems to culminate in his willing acceptance of the crown at the end of the play (5.3.320-27). This is not to say that Edgar loses sight of the supreme value of personal relationships. He clearly feels a much deeper sympathy for his father than he does for Lear, since, as we shall see, he applies himself much more concertedly to the task of restoring Gloucester’s faith in the gods (compare 4.1.25-28 and 3.6.60-61; see 3.6.74-75 and 3.6.110-15 for his decision to leave Lear). However, we may infer that he also sees sovereignty as an opportunity to give free rein to his sympathetic nature, which he knows will sustain him amidst the endemic insincerity of political life.

Edgar’s putative, voluntary accession to the throne at the end of the play, which reflects a natural hierarchy of passion and intellect, corrects the pessimism of the play’s opening, in which Lear is neither willing to continue his own relatively compassionate reign, nor in the end able to pass on the crown to a daughter who is also naturally tender-hearted. Although, in Shakespeare’s scheme, by contrast with that of Plato, philosophers do not have to be forced into politics, the corollary of the compassionate Edgar’s ability to appreciate the intrinsic rewards of sovereignty is that intermediate characters like Lear, who are less likely to develop such an appreciation precisely because their natural sympathy for their subjects is at times overshadowed by the insubstantial gratifications of “pomp,” do indeed need to be impelled to rule by noble lies, just in the manner that Plato envisaged (3.4.28-36).[[29]](#endnote-29)

Although Edgar himself inevitably benefits from the secure order which conventional beliefs generate, as is implied by the fact that he too shelters in the hut, despite his relatively insouciant attitude to the storm, he can manipulate these beliefs at least as effectively as Edmund.[[30]](#endnote-30) (The parallel between the two brothers in this respect is underlined by the way in which Edmund exhorts himself to “sigh like Tom o’ Bedlam”: 1.2.135-36). Edgar certainly uses his disguise as poor Tom to preserve his own life, but his various manipulations are usually motivated primarily by compassion. Even as he begs from Lear, he is exerting himself to soothe the king’s bitter sense that the gods are unjust (3.4.51-61, 3.6.29-32; this point is explored at length below). Similarly, although he “enforc[es]…charity” from “poor pelting villages…sometimes with lunatic bans, sometime with prayers,” just as shamelessly as Edmund manipulated his credulous father by describing his brother as “conjuring the moon” through “wicked charms,” his pious deceptions are also likely to benefit the villagers by reminding them that heaven ultimately rewards generosity and punishes self-love (2.3.17-20, 2.1.38-40). Overall, Edgar’s determination to reassure both Lear and Gloucester as to the existence of divine providence shows that there are forces within human nature which are capable of counterbalancing the wiliness of ambitious self-lovers.

It is significant that Edgar is able “with presented nakedness [to] outface the winds and persecutions of the sky,” once he has decided to disguise himself as a lunatic in order to avoid capture (2.3.11-12). He survives, and ultimately thrives, precisely because he abandons his gentlemanly status and all his conventional values without a second thought: “Edgar I nothing am” (2.3.21). He is intelligent and passionate enough to liberate himself completely from pride, whether in its raw or its sublimated form: not only is he absolutely unambitious, but, unlike Lear, Cordelia or Kent, he is neither noble nor pious.[[31]](#endnote-31) Clothes are used alongside houses to represent the conventional opinions and institutions which shield the majority of the populace from the harshness of self-love at the cost of disguising its true nature.[[32]](#endnote-32) Just as it becomes second nature to live in houses and wear clothes in a civilised society, so we have seen that the codes which instil moderation and respect for the established hierarchy are readily naturalised in the eyes of the populace and indeed most of the elite, partly through simple habit and partly by being presented as part of a divine order. Clothes are apt symbols for such codes: not only do they protect the body from the harshness of nature by concealing its “sham[eful]” drives, which are inalienably private and hence potentially divisive (3.4.65-66), but, being such rigid class signifiers at the time, they may easily be used to represent the conventional hierarchy: Regan is typical in that her robes are indications of her status as well as a means to keep her “warm” (2.4.264-70).

As Lear inadvertently implies, his wish to maintain a train of knights after he has surrendered power could be compared to Regan’s desire to wear “gorgeous” clothes, presumably because it is in part an expression of his desire for “pomp” (2.4.260-70, 3.4.33). Like clothes, however, Lear’s knights also help to ward off the harshness of nature: the king’s retinue reinforces his authority, partly through the simple threat of military force, and partly by concealing the fact that he is in reality nothing more than “a poor, bare, fork’d animal” without these “lendings” (3.4.106-09). Thus, both clothes and Lear’s knights are used to suggest that the established opinions and institutions by which society protects itself from self-love are ultimately manifestations of pride, in however sublimated a form.

Edgar’s accession completes Shakespeare’s analysis of the process by which just regimes develop from the state of nature. His regime, unlike Lear’s, is bound to be absolutely just, at least in its conception, since his passionate and thoughtful nature has enabled him to subjugate his pride completely, so that a desire for “pomp” could never distract him from his compassionate patriotism. Precisely because Edgar is indifferent himself to the various manifestations of sublimated pride which reinforce political authority, he can exploit them in a prudent and flexible manner. His manipulation of Lear and Gloucester (see below) suggests not only that the most passionate and thoughtful individuals will experience a spontaneous desire to care for the non-philosophical majority, but that this care naturally tends to express itself as a concern to reinforce confidence in divine providence.

At the end of the play, Edgar also shows that he can control self-lovers by manipulating their pride. There is no self-serving reason for Edgar to confront Edmund, nor is there any sign that his primary purpose is revenge: he apparently has no plans to fight his brother if Cordelia’s forces are victorious (5.1.40-46). Although, in a fair simulation of noble indignation, he censures Edmund equally for being “false to thy gods, thy brother, and thy father” and “conspirant ‘gainst this high illustrious prince,” his main aim at this point is probably to prevent Edmund from doing any further damage to the kingdom, while showing the assembled company that injustice will inevitably be punished (5.1.135-36; see below).

Edgar challenges Edmund in a manner which conforms to chivalric convention as closely as possible under such unconventional circumstances (5.3.121-31). In accordance with the conventions of the period, he settles on formal, public combat as an effective substitute for a trial. As previously, his ability to manipulate established codes is symbolised by a change of clothing: he now conceals his true identity beneath an anonymous suit of armour (compare 4.1.44-45). He carefully justifies his challenge as conforming to the code of knighthood, when in fact his anonymity would normally bar him from the lists, and manages to goad the proud Edmund into retaliating when there was strictly no need to do so by demeaning him in front of the assembled crowd (5.3.131-51). In a sense the wily Goneril is therefore right to claim that Edmund is “not vanquish’d, but cozen’d and beguil’d” (5.3.152-55).

The manner of Edgar’s defeat of Edmund suggests that the ability of philosophers to distinguish between nature and convention allows them to work to support the established order in the most flexible and effective manner possible, whilst at the same time indicating that ambitious self-lovers are less free than they suppose. Philosophers can emancipate themselves from convention even more radically than self-lovers, since they are likely to remain unmoved by the insubstantial gratifications of social status, as well indifferent to pious or noble convictions. In the end, Edgar exploits Edmund’s proud desire for distinction as effectively as the latter exploited Gloucester’s credulity.

Edgar is equally disingenuous in the manner that he uses Gloucester’s story to reinforce the piety of the large and varied company which has observed the duel, just as he worked to reinvigorate the faith of Lear and Gloucester (see below):

“The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices

Make instruments to plague us:

The dark and vicious place where thee he got

Cost him his eyes.”

(5.3.171-74)

His claim at the end of the play to “speak what we feel, not what we ought to say” is similarly disingenuous, since he includes himself among the “young” who “shall never see so much” as the old, despite the fact that he has actually been betrayed in as egregious a manner as Gloucester and Lear (5.3.325). This inconsistency implies that his intention at this point is by no means to “speak what [he] feel[s],” as he claims, but rather to build a sense of solidarity with his new subjects, as he attempts to shift their attention towards the prospect of a serene future, and away from the horrors of internal dissension and civil war, and perhaps also away from the tenuousness of his own claim to the throne (see 4.5.9-11, 5.1.21-7, 5.3.45-59). Even if we take his statement at face value, it implies that he is only temporarily “obey[ing]” the requirement to “speak what we feel” because of “the weight of this sad time,” and that from now on his public remarks will be much more discreet and measured (5.3.24-25). Thus, over the course of the play Edgar shows that he can manipulate both the ambition of the self-lovers and the piety of the just characters with equal facility. I would suggest that he represents the ideal ruler in the way that he combines intense compassion, which provides him with a natural motive to rule, with a shrewd, strategic intelligence.

As we have seen, whereas Edgar willingly accepts the crown at the end of the play, Lear, Kent and Albany all eschew political rule at some point in the play (see 5.3.299-301, 5.3.320-23).[[33]](#endnote-33) Albany’s ambivalence over whether to oppose the king’s forces is paralleled by Lear’s simmering frustration with the ignoble insincerity which his role demands; a frustration which finally boils over when Cordelia shows her contempt for his machinations, while at the same time proudly displaying her own passionate sincerity. Both are hampered as they strive to accommodate themselves to the demands of political life, not merely by their personal attachments, but by their codes of piety and honour. These codes may help such characters to rule for long periods, as the example of Lear shows, but they also aggravate their natural distaste for the disingenuousness which is an essential element of politics. By contrast, Edgar shows that on rare occasions politics may be regulated entirely by nature.

Although Edgar will doubtless be able to form deep attachments, even he could never fully reconcile these with the demands of public life. Shakespeare uses the actions of France–who, it should be recalled, has married Cordelia purely out of love (1.1.238-41, 1.1.250-61)–to underline this tension in a particularly stark manner. Although France’s invasion does indeed appear to be motivated simply by a compassionate desire to help Cordelia to reinstate Lear, rather than by “ambition”– “my mourning and importun’d tears [he] hath pitied” (4.4.23-29)–he is forced to desert his wife just before the battle with the British troops, leaving his marshal behind to lead his forces, because he has detected a threat which “imports to the kingdom so much fear and danger that his personal return was most requir’d” (4.3.1-8). This decision may well contribute to Cordelia’s defeat, and therefore to her eventual death. We may infer from this example that in extremis all just political leaders may need to prioritise their compassionate patriotism over their most intimate personal relationships. However, it is significant that Shakespeare relegates this caveat to the margins of the main narrative. Under more normal circumstances, rulers will simply have to negotiate carefully between personal and political considerations: thus, Lear has clearly had time to develop his attachment to Cordelia, not to mention the fool, despite the constraints of his position.

# The Threat from Philosophy

Even as Lear is conducting his imaginary trial, there are signs that his confidence in secular justice is being undermined. He relegates the proudly spirited Kent to the position of third judge, and appoints Tom and the fool to preside as first and second judges respectively, despite the fact that their teachings are, as I shall argue, equally detrimental both to robust legal processes and even ultimately to political authority itself (3.6.36-39).

As noted above, the natural desire for retribution which drives Kent and, for the first half of the play, Lear, is founded on the belief that injustice is a perverse and wilful aberration from imperatives which all are naturally primed to obey. As we have seen, however, the fool implicitly contradicts this view early on in the play, advising Lear that self-love is a primal force of nature, as powerful and as imponderable as those which created the Pleiades (1.5.34-36, see above). On the heath he declares “he’s mad that trusts in the tameness of a wolf…or a whore’s oath” (3.6.18-19). It is significant that it is the fool who points out that the defendants in the imaginary trial are in fact “join-stool[s]” (3.6.52). He answers Tom’s lyric, “Come o’er the bourn, Bessy, to me,” which is presumably an oblique reference to Lear’s alienation from his daughters, with a verse which explains that she “dares not come over to thee” because “her boat hath a leak,” thus perhaps suggesting that the hard-heartedness of Goneril and Regan is as natural as sexual desire and pregnancy (3.6.25-28).

Far from seeking to deny the arbitrary force of self-love, as do most of the other characters, the fool is willing to linger in “a brave night,” which “pities neither wise men nor fools,” in order to deliver his cynical mock prophecy (3.2.79, 3.2.12-13). This ‘prophecy,’ delivered on the heath at the height of the storm, brackets self-love and incontinent desire together as forces which routinely and unavoidably disrupt society and degrade attachments (3.2.80-94). In the fool’s view, both the established authorities and the institutions which might enable them to restrain self-love, are in fact themselves constantly in danger of being corrupted by it: the legal system is frequently abused, while priests and “nobles” are often too distracted by their own pompous or lavish displays to instil or model piety and honour. Thus, in some respects, the fool’s view of the world resembles that of the Machiavellian Edmund, who defines human nature as primarily self-regarding (1.2.1-2).

When seen in the light of the balanced judgement which is adumbrated by the play as a whole, the fool’s account seems overly pessimistic. There is nothing in the play to suggest, as the fool does, that self-love cannot be systematically restrained by deterrents, despite its deeply-rooted nature. It is, after all, only when Lear gives up his sovereign power that the problems begin. The fool’s analysis of human nature may be skewed by his own prudent fearfulness: having reluctantly submitted to Lear’s repeated request that he should explore the hovel, he is terrified by the semi-naked Edgar, whom he mistakes for an evil “spirit” (3.4.39-43). This may suggest that, rather than being genuinely philosophical, his stance of disillusioned scepticism is as likely to create terrors where none exist as poor Tom’s superstition; the only difference being that, rather than fabricating a supernatural sphere, his demonising vision is superimposed upon humanity.

It follows from the fool’s pessimistic view of society that thoughtful individuals should concentrate on guarding themselves against the inevitable threats posed by self-love and on restraining the proud and sensual elements within their own nature: usurers, for instance, cannot “tell their gold i’ th’ field,” but 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, 3.2.75). It is only in the fool’s mock utopia that “going shall be us’d with feet;” in the real world, as he advised earlier, prudent travellers will “ride more than [they] go…” (3.2.93-94, 1.4.121). Those who are able to “spy into” what may be impossible to “smell out” thoroughly, will see that self-love is a deeply rooted and potentially dominant element within human nature, and so will 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). The fool himself summarises his key teachings thus: “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).

The fool illustrates the need to resist both the internal and the external threats posed by self-love through his cautionary tale of a man who is forever tormented by a self-regarding wife as a result of his sexual incontinence (3.2.27-34). (Goneril, Regan and Edmund’s relationships later on in the play support Shakespeare’s recurring implication that self-love usually goes hand in hand with such incontinence, even though the two motives are in essence completely distinct: “for there was never yet fair woman but she made mouths in a glass” -3.2.35-36.) He prefaces this anecdote by repeating his earlier recommendation to emulate the snail: “He that has a house to put’s head in has a good head-piece” (1.4.125, 1.5.27-31, 3.2.25-26). Thus, it is the fool who introduces the symbolic association between houses and humanity’s efforts to keep the turbulence of self-love at bay, just as it is left to the fool to compare that turbulence explicitly to “the wind and the rain” (3.2.75). Typically, however, he applies the image solely to the personal sphere, where his prudent advice may indeed be useful to some extent, and ignores the role that social constructs may play in restraining self-love.

The astute fool blames Lear, 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 hinting that he approved of the original plan for succession when he points to the benefits of “keep[ing] one’s eyes on either side’s nose” (1.5.19-23). Rather than questioning Lear’s use of the love test, the fool simply, and perhaps justifiably, criticises him for failing to exploit Cordelia’s unexpected bluntness, echoing the fateful conversation with bitter precision: “Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?” (1.4.130-31). However, it is typical of the apolitical fool to care about this plan only insofar as it affects himself and those whom he holds dear: he refers to the kingdom as Lear’s “land,” his “living” and his “case,” as if he were merely talking about the domestic affairs of a private citizen (1.4.134-35, 1.4.107, 1.4.141, 1.5.31). As his mock prophecy shows, he has no faith in the power of political institutions to create a just regime, whereas one of the aims of the king’s original plan was, as we have seen, to secure order in the country as a whole.

The fool’s belief that attempts to control the predations of self-love are bound to be futile leads him to criticise Lear’s spirited, dignified assertiveness. When Lear starts to wonder whether he should attempt “to take… [his kingdom] again perforce,” the fool promptly reprimands him for not being as “wise” as he is old (1.5.39-45). His claim that Goneril and Regan could only ever be expected to possess the superficial “tameness of a wolf” is presumably intended to dampen the spirited longing which Lear has just expressed for “a thousand with red burning spits [to] come hizzing in upon ‘em” (3.6.15-19). He even advises Lear to use his “tine wit” to “make content with his fortunes fit,” and administer “court holy water”–that is, abject flattery–to his daughters in order to secure “a dry house” (3.2.74-77, 3.2.10-13). As we have seen, such a retreat would actually have been highly dangerous, even, perhaps, if Lear had renounced all pretensions to sovereignty, since his daughters subsequently waste no time in “seek[ing] his death” (3.4.164). Unbeknownst to the fool, who is clearly more naïve than he thinks despite his philosophical disposition, political and, ultimately, military engagement is in fact the only means of safeguarding the security of the very domestic enclaves to which he advises Lear to retreat.

The fool’s advice that Lear should simply “make content with his fortunes fit,” conflicts, not only with the king’s natural revulsion against filial ingratitude, but with the piety and dignified nobility which have been vital driving forces in his long and successful reign. As with Cordelia, whom Lear refers to posthumously as his “poor fool,” the fool’s very bluntness is also symptomatic of a broader lack of concern with politics (5.3.306). He consistently undermines the conventional convictions which have helped to sustain Lear’s regime, criticising his code of honour and, by implication, in his remark about the Pleiades, his pious beliefs (2.1.34-37). The fool does not apparently grasp the absolute nature of the disjunction between those who can withstand, and even relish “ponder[ing]” the harshest truths, and those who flinch away from them (3.4.24). He thus perhaps speaks more truly than he knows when he exclaims that he should “learn to lie” (1.4.179-80). By contrast, Shakespeare himself disguises the harsh truth that egregious self-love is an entirely natural phenomenon by encouraging audiences to focus on, and sympathise with, Lear’s moral indignation, while overlooking the fool’s own sceptical contributions, which are disguised as trivial banter.

Like Plato, the fool also questions whether there is any natural motive to induce a thoughtful individual to rule. His lamentation that a king should blindly play “bo-peep, and go the fools among,” suggests both that Goneril and Regan are in one sense more percipient than Lear, presumably because, according to the fool’s perspective, they understand that politics is essentially driven by self-love rather than passion or morality, and that they are nevertheless still “fools” in a deeper sense, presumably because they do not understand that they can reap no substantial benefits from “snatching” power (1.4.175-78, 1.4.152-58). The fool goes further than this, however: by inverting the real situation– “this fellow has banish’d two on ‘s daughters, and did the third a blessing against his will”–he insinuates that just rulers are as unlikely to find political engagement intrinsically satisfying as the unjust (1.4.102-03).

Certainly, as we have seen, Lear’s agonising over whether to act on his preference for Albany over Cornwall, his desire to give up his sovereignty in order to retire to Cordelia’s “nursery,” and the bogus love test itself all point to genuine tensions between political and personal life. However, while acknowledging these tensions–and indeed exploring them in detail–Shakespeare does not in the end endorse the fool’s view that political life offers no substantial, intrinsic rewards (see the previous section). One could never imagine the fool valuing his connections with a whole community, as Edgar does when he asserts that one may be “free and happy” in the face of suffering, “when grief hath mates, and bearing fellowship,” or even as Lear does when he is proposing to house “poor naked wretches” (3.6.102-10, 3.4.28-36). The fool apparently has no conception of the satisfaction which patriotic statesmen may gain from a just and compassionate stewardship of the country which they love.

It is pertinent to note at this point that the fool does not stay with Lear to the bitter end. Although he is certainly capable of forming close attachments–he has “pin’d away” since the departure of Cordelia–he has always been keenly aware of the folly of “taking one’s part that’s out of favor”: if “thou canst not smile as the wind sits, thou’lt catch cold shortly” (1.4.73-74, 1.4.99-101). Since he also reunderstands the real value of attachments, the fool is clearly aware that “the knave turns fool who runs away,” but his sceptical intelligence also reminds him constantly that a “wise man [would] fly” from the now powerless king, lest he “break [his] neck with following” (2.4.67-87). One may infer that he simply deserts Lear in the end from the fact that he twice lags behind in a manner which suggests that he is indeed looking for a way to “smile as the wind sits”: not only does he remain with Goneril, after the king has ordered all his servants to depart, until she threatens him with “a halter,” but, just before he vanishes completely, he has to be ordered somewhat brusquely by Kent to help carry the king to Dover - “thou must not stay behind” (1.4.314-21, 3.6.100-01).

Like Edmund’s cynicism, the fool’s inconstancy shows that a philosophy which does not take its bearings by deep attachments is likely to be founded, erroneously, on the assumption that self-love is the driving force in the human psyche. Shakespeare would no doubt extend this criticism to much modern thought (see below). The fool’s understanding of politics is limited because he underrates the capacity of forces which are ultimately rooted in attachment to oppose self-love. He does not see that political engagement, even with all the hypocrisies and accommodations which it inevitably entails, may still be motivated by compassionate patriotism, and therefore carry its own intrinsic rewards. Lacking the truly deep attachments which would have inspired total loyalty, the fool would perhaps have been of more use to Lear if he had simply shared the conventional beliefs which reinforce Kent and Gloucester’s intransigent fidelity.

From the start, a part of Lear is open to the fool’s teachings in a manner which again suggests that, although the king is by no means a philosopher, he is more thoughtful than most of the other noble characters: his ambivalent attitude to these teachings is highlighted when, after initially threatening to “whip” the fool for pointing out the imprudence of giving one’s “living” to ambitious daughters, he subsequently threatens to have him “whipt” for lying rather than delivering the bitter truth in full (compare 1.4.110 and 1.4.181). Lear’s appointment of the fool as second judge is the first of many indications that the king has absorbed enough of his sceptical thought to be weakened as a political leader. I will argue that the fool’s teachings are one of the factors that ultimately lead the king to question his previously robust faith in the power of social conventions and established institutions to control self-love.

# The Uses and Limitations of Christianity

Tom’s theology is similarly apolitical, in that it offers no promise that secular justice is either modelled on, or supplemented by, divine judgement. Rather than being punished by God for breaking his oaths in “the sweet face of heaven” and for “serv[ing]…the lust of [his] mistress’ heart,” Tom has simply exposed himself through pride and lust to “the foul fiend[‘s]” opportunistic temptations (3.4.85-94, 3.4.51-58, 3.4.129-41). By contrast with the demon which is portrayed as proactively guiding Gloucester to his destruction, all Tom’s fiend can do is lead him randomly “through fire and through flame, through ford and whirlpool, o’er bog and quagmire,” while simply ensuring that “knives,” “halters” and “ratsbane” are rather more easily available to him than they would have been anyway (3.4.51-55; compare 4.6.66-74). Where he might appear more influential, he could be seen simply as a ruefully sardonic personification of Tom’s own youthful arrogance: the fiend “made him proud of heart, to ride on a bay trotting-horse over four-inched bridges, to course his own shadow for a traitor” (3.4.55-58).

Although Tom presents demonic forces as immanent in the world–he brackets together “whirlwinds, star-blasting, and taking” (presumably by witchcraft)[[34]](#endnote-34)–their influence is not only relatively trivial, but could be explained entirely naturalistically. Tom draws little distinction between “the cold wind” and the baneful influence of “the foul fiend” (3.4.59-60, 3.4.46-47, 3.4.96-99), or between studying to “prevent the fiend, and to kill vermin”: it is difficult to tell whether he is being “vex[ed]” by lice or demons when he suddenly declares, “There could I have him now–and there–and there again–and there” (3.4.159, 3.4.61-62).[[35]](#endnote-35) Similarly, “the foul fiend Flippertigibbet” turns out merely to cause cataracts, squinting, hare-lip and mildew, and to “hurt…” only “the poor creature of earth,” while Hoppedance simply seems to be a convenient personification of Tom’s hunger (3.4.115-19, 3.6.30-32).

Crucially, in contrast with his later manipulation of Gloucester, Edgar makes no reference at all to angelic interventions when talking to Lear (compare 4.6.49-74). In Tom’s fourth song, which he sings after being appointed principal judge in Lear’s imaginary trial, a role which he promises to perform “justly,” the speaker could be seen as implying, with understandable obliqueness, that secular justice is no longer supported by an immanent providence: “Sleepest or wakest thou, jolly shepherd?” (3.6.40-44). In the song, the errant sheep, a stock image of course for sinful humanity, have no-one immediately at hand to protect them after straying “in the corn,” but must simply rely on the promise of salvation: “And for one blast of thy minikin mouth, thy sheep shall take no harm.” In Protestant theology in particular, supernatural interventions are often pared down to a single cataclysmic event at the end of time, when Christ will return to redeem original sin.[[36]](#endnote-36)

Thus, according to most Protestant doctrine, humankind must strive to resist the depredations of self-love simply through their faith, without the immediate aid of divine providence. In the first of Tom’s songs–all of which should be read with particular care, I would argue, since Shakespeare tends to conceal his most provocative thoughts in the most seemingly trivial and random passages–St. Withold is portrayed as attempting to banish a demon purely by the force of his words: he “bid her alight, and her troth plight, and aroint thee, witch” (3.4.120-24). It is significant that we never learn whether his invocation is successful. Similarly, in his fifth song, Tom repeatedly promises to chase off the fierce dogs which the demented king has confused with his predatory daughters simply by “throw[ing] his head at them” (3.6.64-73). I would argue that this particularly obscure phrase refers to faith in the power of Christ, which reassures believers that sin has already been defeated in the great scheme of things: “Dogs leapt the hatch, and all are fled” (3.4.73). This eschatological interpretation explains the strange mixture of tenses in Tom’s song: he says nothing in the present tense, but first promises that he “will throw his head at them,” and then asserts that the dogs have already “fled.” The fact that Tom only promises to intercede with his “head” might prompt the reader to compare the purely intellectual nature of the reassurances which Tom offers Lear to the absolutely concrete “miracle” which he concocts to confirm Gloucester’s belief in the direct influence of supernatural forces, both demonic and angelic (4.6.55, 4.6.69-79).

Priests might reassure their flocks that Christ has already intervened in order ultimately to redeem sin and end all suffering, but, since they are likely to preach that their “jolly shepherd” has not yet reawakened from “sleep,” it seems doubtful that these doctrines could ever deter sinners as effectively as “the great gods” whom Lear has previously invoked, whose thunderous retribution is consistently capable of making the vicious “tremble” and “shake” (3.2.49-59). In the end Tom himself seems to admit that his response to the unruly dogs is ineffectual: “Poor Tom, thy horn is dry” (3.4.74-75). However, despite the weaknesses of these doctrines when considered strictly from a political perspective, in terms of their power to control self-love, they arguably represent the most powerful means possible of justifying the ways of God on an individual level. Rather than stretching the evidence to argue that arbitrary tribulations represent personalised divine puishments, Christian theology justifies all suffering as precipitated by original sin: “Thy sheep be in the corn” (3.4.42).

Protestantism in particular often justifies this rationalisation of suffering by extending the concept of sin to include states of mind and spiritual impulses. In concrete terms the worst that Tom seems to have done was to drink, gamble, dress fashionably, borrow heavily and “serv[e] the lusts of my mistress’ heart” (3.4.85-97). At the start of his potted spiritual autobiography, however, he foregrounds pride as the underlying vice which has exposed him to the fiends: he was a “servingman…proud in heart and mind” (3.4.80-85). His distorted echo of Lear’s condemnation of his “pelican daughters,” which comes close to converting “pelican” into ‘peacock,’ a traditional emblem of pride and lust, suggests that, rather than dwelling on the faults of others, the king should focus his attention on his own self-love: “Pillicock sat on Pillicock-Hill” (3.4.70-77). By adding a final injunction, “set not thy sweet heart on proud array,” to the traditional Mosaic commandments against swearing, adultery and filial disobedience, Tom reflects the way in which the ten commandments, which relate entirely to behaviour, are supplemented and indeed frequently superseded in the Christian tradition by a new concern with the state of the “heart” (3.4.80-83).[[37]](#endnote-37) The psychological version of original sin invoked by Edgar as poor Tom, in which pride itself becomes the chief enemy, regardless of whether it exerts any substantial influence on external behaviour, provides a particularly effective means of reconciling arbitrary suffering with divine providence, for no-one can justifiably claim to be “more sinn’d against than sinning,” once the concept of sin has been extended to include the inner promptings of self-love (3.2.59-60).

Deeply disturbed by his sense that there is “corruption” in the court, which was itself triggered by his recognition that Regan is naturally “warp’d,” Lear appears to take Edgar’s song about the dogs as an invitation to replace the trial of his daughters with a more philosophical approach: as we have seen, he now wishes to “anatomize Regan; see what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that make these hard hearts?” (3.6.52-56, 3.6.76-78). Since sin is now seen as universal, it seems both futile and unjust to single out individuals for punishment, especially as political and legal institutions are themselves bound to suffer from endemic “corruption.” Lear’s original god, the thunder-wielding Jove, who modelled a robust, dignified assertion of authority and supplemented secular justice with divine rewards and sanctions (2.4.227-28, 3.2.49-59), is now replaced by a more remote and cerebral theology, wherein alienation from “the sweet face of heaven” becomes the only substantial sin, which automatically triggers its own internal torments (3.4.89). Once faith in direct divine retribution has been abandoned, with all the support that this used to offer to secular laws, and replaced with an approach which prioritises an inner spiritual alignment with Christ, analysis of the psychology of “hard hearts,” who resist the power of His potentially redemptive love, may easily come to be valued above the political and legal institutions which play such a vital role in protecting society against the depredations of self-love.

Although Tom’s teachings do not directly satisfy Lear’s desire to see Goneril and Regan punished by the gods for their callous actions, he clearly finds them deeply appealing–as is shown by his eager questions and his repeated insistence that his interlocutor is a profound philosopher (3.4.154-58, 3.4.171-72, 3.4.175-76)–since they restore his faith in divine justice, albeit arguably at the expense of extending the concept of sin until it becomes useless for political and legal purposes. It is no criticism of Edgar to argue, as I have done above, that his Christian teachings degrade Lear’s capacity to rule: having no knowledge of Cordelia’s military action, he has understandably determined to treat Lear as a private citizen rather than as a king. (The fool could of course be defended in the same way, although, as we have seen, he tends to side-line political considerations anyway.) Indeed, Edgar achieves a remarkable feat in soothing Lear so quickly and so deeply. Although clearly deranged, the king is relatively peaceful almost throughout the second half of the play. Edgar seems to understand that, precisely because Christianity psychologises and universalises sin, while limiting divine intervention to a single redemptive act, it may preserve faith in a divine order in the face of all kinds of injustice and adversity. His success in alleviating Lear’s suffering may be taken to indicate that these doctrines have their uses when they are widely accepted by the populace, but, as we shall see, the play implicitly argues that they should certainly not be adopted by the ruling elite.

After Lear’s respectful responses have convinced Edgar that he has succeeded in restoring the king’s faith in the justice of the gods in the manner described above, he compares himself to Child Roland in the old Scottish fairy story, who is forced to kill a simulacrum of his sister in order to free her from “the dark tower” of the elf lord (3.4.182). This analogy might suggest, among other things, that Edgar has had to overcome his own reluctance to dismantle the artificial self which has been forged by Lear’s conventional nobility and piety in order to soothe the king’s anger so successfully. Like Roland, Edgar must restrain not only his hunger, but, in the short term, his natural pity in order to fulfil this compassionate mission.

Edgar then implicitly compares himself to the giant in ‘Jack and the Beanstalk,’ making a slight, but potentially significant change to the famous chant: “His word was still, ‘Fie, foh, and fum, I smell the blood of a British man’” (3.4.183-84). Despite his compunction, Edgar is prepared to sacrifice Lear the statesman, who, as we have seen, was able to unite, not just England, but the whole of Britain under his reign, having recognised that the king could only be reconciled to his bitter lot through a Christian conversion. If this interpretation is correct, then the astute Edgar is shown to be as sensitively attuned to the potential tensions between Christian doctrine and political authority as Shakespeare himself. He understands that the new Lear will be closer to the natural man, as the story of Child Roland implies, for Christianity may well encourage the sincere personal attachments which he and Cordelia instinctively value, but at the same time that the politically useful, simulated version of the king, compounded partly of piety and dignified nobility, which has ruled successfully for so many years, will be lost forever.

Lear’s enquiries are not genuinely philosophical, although his repeated use of the term may point to the way in which philosophy and Christian theology work together to dismantle his former convictions (see below): he is driven to ask Tom to explain “the cause of thunder” by a desire to confirm his faith in divine providence rather than by disinterested curiosity regarding the nature of the universe (3.4.155). If Tom answered, as some Protestant theologians might, that thunder is an arbitrary manifestation of a fallen world, in which humanity has divorced itself from God and therefore surrendered itself to mechanical processes, then his teaching could easily merge in Lear’s mind with the fool’s sceptical materialism. In this way the doctrine of *deus absconditus* which Protestantism popularised could be seen as ushering in the Enlightenment.

If, as I have argued, clothes are used in the same way as houses, to represent social conventions which simultaneously protect and conceal,[[38]](#endnote-38) then the king’s view of Tom as “the thing itself,” namely “unaccommodated man [who] is no more but such a poor, bare, fork’d animal,” is flawed, for Edgar has actually “reserv’d a blanket, else we had been all sham’d” (3.4.102-08, 3.4.66). The blanket is an apt symbol for the quasi-philosophical nature of Protestantism, which strips away a superstitious belief in demonic and celestial intervention and accepts that self-love is endemic, but ultimately makes these concessions purely in order to reinforce faith in divine providence. Having “reserv’d” a belief in divine justice by reducing it to this residual form, these doctrines manage effectively to conceal the “sham[eful]” truth that nature is arbitrary, and hence often unjust. Far from presenting self-love as unnatural and beyond the pale, as traditional religions might have done, such doctrines can only achieve their end by actively exaggerating its influence.

Lear has little understanding of the essential nature of humanity, despite symbolically “*tearing off*” his clothes (3.4.108-09). Although he later interrupts his attempt to discover whether there is “any cause in nature that make these hard hearts” to demand in effect that Edgar remove even his blanket, he does not realise that the latter would be left naked if he complied, but sees himself simply as toning down “Persian” luxury (3.6.76-81). Lear would in fact be “sham’d” by the truth which he thinks he wants to pursue should it ever be uncovered by his “anatomiz[ing],” since, although he may by now have abandoned his hope that divine providence might intervene to punish his daughters, he is still fundamentally sustained by his faith. He welcomes Edgar’s account of his spiritual journey, because he longs to believe that he himself also has an immortal soul which is playing a significant role in a cosmic struggle between divine and diabolic forces, even though this struggle is removed from the quotidian world.

It is possible that there is an allusion to the dualism which underpins Christian accounts of the human condition hidden in the fool’s comparison of Gloucester’s sudden entrance, bearing “a little fire in a wild field,” to “an old lecher’s heart,” which has “a small spark, all the rest on’s body cold,” for, according to conventional scholastic teaching, a soul is indeed a sort of “walking fire,” since it constitutes the vital “spark” that animates the base mechanism of the body (3.4.110-14). It may be significant that when Lear finally countenances the possibility that Cordelia’s soul is as irremediably dead as her body, he “undo[es] a button” (5.3.307-10).

Lear’s choice of his two principal judges is thus deeply ironic, since they both hold views which tend to undermine faith in legal processes, albeit for very different reasons. Lacking a passionate concern for the welfare of his fellow countrymen, and believing that self-love is too deeply rooted in society to be controlled by legal deterrents, the fool concentrates on self-protection, while his–accurate–understanding that self-love naturally predominates in certain individuals is incompatible with the very premise upon which retributive justice is founded. On his part, Tom can only reassure Lear that the heavens are just by shifting the theatre of the struggle against self-love to the individual psyche, which in a fallen world can do no more than rely humbly on the mercy of a loving God. Neither Tom nor the fool believe in the stern traditional gods which Lear has previously sought to invoke, whose interventions could reinforce secular sanctions and model proud and passionate retribution. In sum, there is in practice less difference between Tom’s version of piety and the fool’s sceptical philosophy than one might have imagined, despite the ideological gulf between the two, since both advise Lear that he must focus constantly on moderating his own self-love in a manner which directs him away from his spirited urge to confront it in others.

By contrast, Kent, who is relegated to the position of third judge, provides the most prominent example in the play of the power of assured, noble indignation (2.2.9-43). Ironically, the spirited Kent is much more suited to the administration of justice than either of his ‘superiors’ in Lear’s imaginary court, since, as his treatment of Oswald in act 2, scene 2 shows, he believes whole-heartedly both in delivering retribution and in his own moral superiority to those whom he condemns. As we have seen, he is certainly vulnerable to the encroachments of ambitious narcissists after Lear’s effective abdication, but only because he is slow to realise that he has now lost the authority to administer such retribution effectively. Overall, Kent therefore represents precisely the sturdy qualities which Lear eschews after his ‘enlightenment’.

# The Uses and Limitations of Traditional Piety

Shakespeare explores the strengths and weaknesses of Christianity, considered as a political religion, in comparison to classical religions, or religions based on the Old Testament, by inviting us to contrast Edgar’s ‘conversion’ of Lear with his treatment of Gloucester. His decision to set the play in a primitive era allows us to imagine that Edgar can choose freely between the two. By chance, Edgar is witness to an exchange in which the blind and desperate duke repels an old man, a tenant “these fourscore years,” who is anxious to help him, presumably out of a mixture of “ancient love” and habitual respect: “thy comforts can do me no good at all” (4.1.12-16, 4.1.43). After hearing this he realises that, as with Lear himself, he cannot cure his father’s despair in an entirely natural way, simply by revealing his identity and attempting to “comfort…” him. Gloucester is neither intelligent nor passionate enough to emulate Edgar’s own natural resilience.

Gloucester undoubtedly possesses a sympathetic nature: he declines his old tenant’s help partly because the latter may be “hurt” if he is found in his master’s company (4.1.17). At the same time, he invests just actions with a cosmic significance, since they both conform to, and are supplemented by, the will of the gods (see above). Even as he generously gives Edgar his purse, hoping that his own “wretched[ness]” will at least make his helper “the happier,” he prays that the “heavens [will] deal so still,” and by the same token, punish “the superfluous and lust-dieted man, that slaves your ordinance, that will not see because he does not feel,” so that “distribution should undo excess, and each man have enough” (4.1.65-71). Later he prays that his natural gratitude to the disguised Edgar for showing him the way will be supplemented by “the bounty and the benison of heaven” (4.6.224-26).

However, although Gloucester hopes against hope that the “heavens [will] deal so still,” his undeserved suffering has now led him to worry that men might be as insignificant as “flies” or “worm[s]” in the eyes of the gods (4.1.33-37). Like Lear, he shies away from atheism, but cannot escape the thought that the gods might simply be callously indifferent to his fate (compare 3.2.19-24). Indeed, the piety of the prayer quoted above is itself partially undermined by his very generosity to Edgar, which he implicitly presents as a corrective to this callousness: “Here, take this purse, thou whom the heav’ns’ plagues have humbled to all strokes” (4.1.64-65). As he explains in another deeply devout prayer to the “mighty gods,” the motive for his attempted suicide is itself pious, for to live on would be to “fall to quarrel with your great opposeless wills” (4.6.34-40). The extent of Gloucester’s reliance on his faith is illustrated by the extreme lengths to which he is prepared to go in order to protect it from his own bitter anger. He cannot accept that his suffering is simply an arbitrary result of the natural harshness of self-love, and, despite his doubts, clings desperately to the conventional doctrines which persuade him that the universe is just. His blinding is thus symbolic, since his reassuring vision of the world as the theatre of a cosmic battle between good and evil prevents him from seeing the true nature of the struggle between attachments and self-love.

Edgar sees no reason not to attempt to “cure” Gloucester’s urge to destroy himself by manipulating his conventional beliefs, since it is in large part triggered by the loss of these very beliefs (compare 4.6.33-34). He convinces his father that a fiend has been facilitating his attempted suicide, and that he has only been saved by a heavenly “miracle” (4.6.49-74). This ruse induces Gloucester to vow to “remember” his faith in a divine order and to determine henceforth to “bear affliction” patiently, praying that the “ever-gentle gods” should “let not my worser spirit tempt me again to die before you please” (4.6.75-79, 4.6.217-19). Thus, Gloucester’s story again implies that it is possible for thoughtful individuals to fortify the credulous against the arbitrary harshness of nature by reinforcing their faith in a just providence.

In contrast with the account which he gave Lear, Edgar now portrays both heavenly and demonic powers as constantly intervening in the material world in significant ways. Whereas Christianity, at least in most of its Protestant variants, could be seen as a quasi-philosophical religion, since it acknowledges that self-love is endemic and that divine forces are not immanent in the world, the traditional faith that Edgar seeks to reinforce in Gloucester is straightforwardly credulous. Shakespeare hints at this distinction through the sartorial symbolism which I have argued runs throughout the play: whereas Tom’s naked body is largely, though not entirely, exposed in his initial incarnation, he is fully dressed when he convinces his father that he has been deceived by a fiend and saved by a miraculous intervention from the gods (3.4.65-66, 4.1.44-50). It is particularly appropriate that the protean Edgar dresses as a peasant at this point, since his account of the fiend draws on popular superstition. (By contrast, he wears armour when he is exploiting chivalric convention: 5.3.143.)

Whereas with Lear, Edgar invents fiends whose interventions are random and relatively trivial, and indeed could easily be interpreted simply as natural events, Gloucester’s demon is presented as making a concerted effort to help him to commit suicide (compare 3.4.51-58, 3.4.115-19 with 4.6.66-68). Moreover, whereas the former were nebulous beings, hardly more than personifications of pride, despair and hunger (see above), the latter is absolutely concrete, with eyes like “two full moons; he had a thousand noses, horns welk’d and waved like the enridged sea” (compare 3.4.55-56, 3.6.30-32 with 4.6.69-74). Crucially, moreover, whereas in Tom’s earlier account, Flippertigibbet was opposed only by the injunctions of a human saint, Gloucester’s fiend is now apparently frustrated by a direct divine intervention (compare 4.6.49-55, 4.6.73-74 with 3.4.120-24).

Rather than exhorting Gloucester’s “sweet heart” to learn humility, as with Lear, Tom now concentrates simply on sinful actions, which he implies are inevitably punished by fiends. The five fiends which he lists, namely Obidicut, Hobbididence, Mahu, Modo and Flippertigibbet, oversee the incitement and the punishment of lust, dumbness, stealing, murder, and the “mopping and mowing [of] chambermaids and waiting-women” respectively (4.1.58-63). The same fiends which Edgar previously portrayed as encouraging spiritual conditions such as pride or despair are now presented as concerning themselves entirely with vicious behaviour (see 3.4.51-61). Whereas Edgar reminded the company that “the prince of darkness is a gentleman… Modo he’s called, and Mahu,” when he was striving to persuade Lear that the primary sin is pride, he now asserts that Mahu and Modo preside over “stealing” and “murder” respectively (3.4.143-44).

Edgar uses his account of the five demons to adumbrate a point which he makes more clearly after Gloucester’s death, namely that the duke’s “dark and vicious” affairs were fittingly punished by gods, who “are just, and of our pleasant vices make instruments to plague us” (see 5.3.171-74). The first and last of the demons on Tom’s list of tormentors could be seen as alluding tactfully to Gloucester’s “lust[ful]” siring of Edmund, since the “mopping and mowing” refers particularly to the flirtations of “chambermaids and waiting-women” (4.1.62-63). Similarly, Hobbididence’s ascribed role as “prince of dumbness” is probably an allusion to the duke’s attempt to marginalise Edmund by keeping him “out nine years” (4.1.59-60, 1.1.32-33). The “stealing” and “murder” over which Mahu and Modo preside are surely references to Edmund’s plan to succeed to the dukedom himself, after effectively committing fratricide (4.1.60-61). It is typical of Edgar to use Edmund’s crimes, which were of course provoked in an entirely mundane way by his brother’s enforced “dumbness,” and ultimately caused simply by Gloucester’s incontinence and his subsequent shame, as evidence for the justice of the gods.

Edgar’s list of the demons which have allegedly been tormenting him seems to go some way towards restoring his father’s faith in heavenly justice: Gloucester immediately prays to the heavens that “the superfluous and lust-dieted man, that slaves your ordinance…[should] feel your pow’r quickly” (4.1.67-69). It is a relatively easy task to persuade him that he is being punished by heaven, because, unlike Lear, he has actually committed what could be construed as “a dark and vicious” sin. Later, Gloucester’s new determination to “bear affliction,” after being preserved by the apparent “miracle,” presumably reflects his acceptance that his blinding and exposure to the fiend were just punishments for his lust and subsequent repression of Edmund, as well as his gratitude to the gods for ultimately extending their mercy (4.6.55, 4.6.75-77). Overall, the creed which Edgar seeks to reinforce in his father seems closer to classical religions and the Mosaic faiths than the New Testament, and perhaps closer to Catholicism that Protestantism, since it concerns itself with penalising actions rather than modulating spiritual states, while at the same time portraying supernatural forces as directly and consistently interceding in the world, both to punish wrongdoers and, presumably, to reward virtue.

Traditional piety of the sort which Edgar seeks to instil in his father is certainly presented as broadly beneficial, since it enables the credulous to endure all sorts of arbitrary tribulations. However, it is significant that, by contrast with his treatment of Lear, which, as we have seen, effectively reconciled the king to his lot, Edgar never fully succeeds in arming his father against “affliction.” Despite Gloucester’s initial determination to “bear” his pain stoically after his miraculous rescue, each new material setback inevitably offers him further evidence of the endemic nature of cruelty and injustice (4.6.230-31, 4.6.279-84, 5.2.5-8). The duke’s frequent relapses into despair suggest that traditional religions can never entirely explain away the arbitrary injustices which their adherents are bound to encounter in the natural course of events.

Lear sets Edgar even greater problems than Gloucester, because he is both more thoughtful and less sinful than the duke. This is probably why Edgar decides to preach a Protestant version of Christianity in the scenes on the heath, in which faith overshadows works and sin is almost identified with the pride which has led humanity to reject a merciful God. However, as we have already seen, although this approach is a uniquely powerful way of justifying the ways of God to man on a personal level, it does so at some political cost. Lear gains emotional reassurance at the expense of losing the confident determination to enforce the law which has no doubt made him such a successful ruler (see the section below for a fuller treatment of this point), whereas Gloucester’s artificially enhanced belief in divine intervention would not have interfered with the duke’s capacity to rule justly, if he had ever regained his dukedom. Directly after having his own traditional faith in divine justice restored, Gloucester understandably dismisses as deranged the sceptical humility which leads Lear to “preach” that the only appropriate response to “this great stage of fools” is to weep like a child (4.6.178-83, 4.6.279).[[39]](#endnote-39)

Thus, Edgar’s contrasting approaches to Lear and Gloucester serve to highlight, in an understandably veiled way, the strengths and weaknesses of Christianity as a political religion in comparison to classical or Mosaic faiths, or even Roman Catholicism. The doctrines of original sin and *Deus absconditus* may combine to provide a supremely effective way of convincing the populace as a whole that the heavens are just, but they undermine some of the basic assumptions which have traditionally sustained both the legal system and, as we shall see in the next section, even political authority itself. Shakespeare’s overall implication is that rulers themselves should either be thoroughly enlightened in the manner of Edgar, or at least adhere to a faith which models retributive justice. Although, as noted above, such a faith may render its adherents vulnerable in unjust regimes, precisely because it tends to mask the role which conventions play in maintaining a just order, it is at least likely to encourage statesmen who are disposed to be assertive to confront self-love in a dignified and authoritative manner.

Lear’s ‘Enlightenment’

We can learn much about the character of Lear’s former regime from his apparently rambling monologues in act 4 (4.6.86-92). These provide further evidence that Lear’s proud assertiveness was always regulated by a compassionate care for his kingdom: he interrupts his military reminiscences to call for “peace, peace,” and to demand that the humblest mouse be given their “piece of toasted cheese” (4.6.89-90). He was previously supported in his determination to nurture and defend his just regime–illustrated here by his supervision of a system of legal tender, which not only facilitated trade, but allowed him to “press…” recruits to his army–by his proud belief that his laws were ultimately derived from “nature,” by which he means divine right, rather than merely devised by human “art” (4.6.82-87). Lear always knew that he could only defend his compassionate regime by confronting insurrection and invasion boldly and efficiently: “There’s my gauntlet, I’ll prove it on a giant. Bring up the brown bills” (4.6.90-91). He recalls gleefully celebrating the accuracy of his carefully selected bowmen, perhaps even on the battle-field itself, where all compassion was temporarily suspended: “O, well flown, bird! i’ th’ clout, i’th clout -hewgh!” (44.6.87-88, 4.6.91-92). We may conclude from this monologue that, as king, Lear alternated between attempting to cater compassionately even for the humblest inhabitants of his kingdom, and proudly relishing the noble assertiveness that allowed him to protect the enclave of justice which he had painstakingly constructed, sustained by his sense that he was an emissary of the gods.

Lear’s ‘enlightenment’ disrupts this salutary fusion of natural compassion and conventional piety and nobility. Schooled by the fool as well as by events, he has learnt that “when the rain came to wet me once, and the wind to make me chatter,” they were simply arbitrary natural forces, since “the thunder would not peace at my bidding” (4.6.100-03). He now declares that that he has abandoned his belief that kings are appointed and sustained by divine providence: to “flatter…” him as if he were a god “was no good divinity” (4.6.96-100). I would argue that Shakespeare’s ultimate purpose in this play is to explore the complex causes and potentially chaotic consequences of enlightenment. As we have seen, Shakespeare uses both the fool and Edmund to show that sceptical forms of philosophy, which place undue emphasis on the power of self-love, can be a major threat to political authority.

Between them, poor Tom and the fool have indeed convinced Lear that human nature is primarily self-loving: “but to the girdle do the gods inherit, beneath is all the fiends’: there’s hell, there’s darkness…” (4.6.126-27). Lear recoils in shock and disgust from his vision of human beings as “Centaurs,” who on the surface present a “simp’ring” conformity to prevailing codes, while beneath “is the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding, stench, consumption” (4.6.118-31). His horror could be seen as the original, naive reaction to the reduction of humanity to its basest drives; a reduction which, one might argue, is almost taken for granted in much mainstream modern and post-modern thought, as Shakespeare perhaps anticipates in his portrayal of the Machiavellian Edmund.[[40]](#endnote-40)

At the end of the play the Christian doctrines of the Fall and original sin apparently merge in Lear’s mind with the fool’s proto-Hobbesian analysis of the pervasive influence of self-love and the basest physical passions, as was perhaps previously insinuated by Lear’s insistence on addressing poor Tom as a philosopher. Lear’s account of “hell” hangs between literal and metaphorical senses: his vision of the inferno is too graphic to dismiss as purely symbolic, but at the same time could be interpreted in purely material terms -especially as “hell” was a colloquial term for female genitals (4.6.127). This ambiguity suggests that the free thinking of the times is no more genuinely philosophical than the scholastic amalgam of Christianity and classical thought which it sought to replace, since it too is partly derived from Christian doctrine.[[41]](#endnote-41)

Having been exposed to this amalgam of influences, Lear now believes that self-love is an ineluctable force: he bids “copulation thrive,” on the grounds that human beings are no more amenable to restraint than wrens and flies (4.6.109-31). Lear’s recognition that Regan’s “heart” was itself made of “warp’d” material, which led him to abort his imaginary trial, suspecting “corruption in the place” and “false justicer[s],” can now be seen as pivotal, since it was a sign of his capitulation to the pessimism of Tom and the fool (3.6.53-56). If they are right to identify self-love as the overriding element in human nature, then it must pervade the very institutions which purport to protect society from its influence, in exactly the way that the fool’s mock prophecy assumes (3.2.81-94).

From now on, Lear abandons his faith in the moral authority of the ruling elite, and assumes that there is in fact no substantial distinction between judges and thieves: “a dog’s obey’d in office” (4.6.150-59).[[42]](#endnote-42) His compassionate sense of justice now turns in on itself: if laws merely enable self-lovers who are dressed in “robes and furr’d gowns” to subjugate those in “tatter’d] clothes,” then it makes sense to declare, “None does offend, none, I say none” (4.6.164-68). This is the key speech in the whole play in many ways, since it highlights the danger of dismantling the conventional codes of nobility and piety which reinforce and naturalise virtue, since non-philosophers would be unlikely to replace these codes with a sober and proportionate appraisal of self-love.[[43]](#endnote-43) It is significant that in rejecting clothes as representing a corrupt hierarchy, Lear also seeks to deprive himself of boots, the most unambiguously useful item of clothing (4.6.164-73).

So indiscriminate is Lear’s cynicism that he now even refuses to trust the gentleman who has been sent to retrieve him, despite the fact that the latter seems to be motivated simply by love for the “most dear” Cordelia and by pious and dutiful respect, both for her Christ-like virtue, which “redeems nature from the general curse which twain have brought her to,” and for the king’s own royal authority (4.6.188-207). Similarly, Lear now makes no distinction between his three sons-in-law, even though two of them have striven to rescue and reinstate him, and initially groups even Kent with the “murderers, traitors all” who have contributed to Cordelia’s death (4.6.186-87, 5.3.269-70). (Subsequently, he fails to show the effusive gratitude which Kent had expected to receive for his loyal service, perhaps because he is now focused on pursuing his own personal redemption through his relationship with Cordelia, rather than on judging the actions of others: 5.3.279-95, 1.4.4-7; see below).

Shakespeare quietly undermines the rationale which Lear gives for his pessimism: the “beadle…lash[ing] that whore” may indeed “hotly lust…to use her in that kind for which thou whip’st her,” but this does not mean that he will act on these desires (4.6.160-63). Similarly, there is actually a substantial difference between “the usurer” and “the cozener” whom he “hangs,” since the latter obeys the law, and, despite his ambiguous status and focus on self-aggrandisement, provides a useful social service (4.6.163). Thus, whereas Tom invited Lear to concentrate on motive rather than behaviour in a manner that is typical of Christian, and especially Protestant theology, Shakespeare covertly reminds us that it is in fact conformity to the law which sustains social order -as has been noted, even Goneril and Regan caused no disruption while they were forced to obey their father’s sovereign power. (One might even add that corrupt authority figures may still play a role in enforcing public order, as Angelo is initially tried to do in *Measure for Measure*.)

Encouraged by the teachings of Tom and the fool, Lear fails to draw a distinction between the raw self-love of the “cozener” and the “whore” on the one hand and, on the other, what might well be the sublimated self-love of the “beadle” and the “usurer,” and ultimately of judges and kings, whose pride, avarice and lust may be regulated by piety and honour as well as by expedient conformity, and even at times restrained by a naturally compassionate disposition. The play itself undoubtedly presents just regimes as eminently achievable: leaving aside the passionate sympathy shown both by Edgar and by Cornwall’s loyal servant, and the mixture of natural affection and instilled dutifulness which drives Gloucester, Albany and Kent to help Lear, and presumably impelled them to support his previous regime, one may infer from the pious shame expressed by Cornwall’s two compliant servants that the majority even of those who are partly or mainly regulated by prudent expedience would normally respect the established values of a just regime (3.7.99-107). Overall, Shakespeare therefore portrays what Lear thinks of as enlightenment as in reality merely the substitution of a corrosively reductive delusion for another set of illusions which were at least politically useful.[[44]](#endnote-44)

When Lear has been reunited with Cordelia in what he imagines at first to be the afterlife, his vision of her as “a soul in bliss” and himself as “bound upon a wheel of fire,” “scald[ed]” by his own tears, shows how, under the auspices of poor Tom, he has begun to concentrate exclusively on his failure to align himself humbly with his own loving heart; a failure which he sees as having alienated him both from God and from Cordelia herself, who in his mind now comes to embody the spirit of Christ’s redemptive love (4.7.44-47). Certainly, his newly acquired Christian principles are in many ways conducive to intimate personal relationships, since they encourage the humble self-restraint which such relationships demand, but the corollary of this is that worldly power and authority are now perceived merely as obstacles to this “bliss,” since they encourage a potentially divisive pride (see especially 4.6.96-105). By now, Lear’s dignified and assertive sense of his own authority has been dismantled and replaced with an abjectly child-like humility: he attempts to kneel to Cordelia, dubbing himself “a foolish fond old man” and offers to drink poison as penance (4.7.58-59, 4.7.71).[[45]](#endnote-45) In so doing, he forgets both the generous and prudent concern for the welfare of the kingdom as a whole which informed his original plan, and the role that Cordelia herself played in its failure.

Unlike his original wish to retreat to Cordelia’s “nursery,” Lear’s desire to “pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh” with his daughter for the rest of his days is not supported by a cunning and audacious plan to safeguard both her position and that of the kingdom as a whole (1.1.123-24, 5.3.11-12).[[46]](#endnote-46) By the end of the play, Lear has seemingly renounced both his political prudence and his code of spirited nobility. Consequently, rather than castigating Goneril and Regan for their callousness, as Cordelia clearly expects at first, he welcomes prison eagerly (5.3.7-8). Whereas, as king, he saw it as his business to manipulate or deter ambitious self-lovers, as is implied both by his original plan to secure his succession and his imagined arraignment of his daughters, not to mention by his rambling recollections of his disciplined archers and “brown bills,” he now merely proposes that Cordelia and he should loftily “laugh at [the] gilded butterflies, and…poor rogues” who infest the court (4.6.87-92, 5.3.12-13). Similarly, he has apparently abandoned his former, public-spirited demand that the gods should punish not only his elder daughters, but all “covert and convenient seeming” miscreants, in order to focus on a purely personal redemption, in which an exchange of “blessing” and “forgiveness” with Cordelia would merge easily with pious “pray[er]” (3.2.49-59, 5.3.10-12; see also 1.4.275-89, 2.4.227-28, 3.2.1-9). His new code of piety encourages self-denying love rather than proud, spirited retribution: “Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia, the gods themselves throw incense” (5.3.20-21).

However, Shakespeare undermines Lear’s attempt to abstract his attachment to Cordelia from the fickle and heartless world of politics in bitterly ironic fashion: even as the king is proposing that he and his daughter should spend their days in prison reviewing the “court news” of “who loses and who wins; who’s in, who’s out,” “wear[ing] out” in a spirit of lofty detachment “packs and sects of great ones, that ebb and flow by th’ moon,” Edmund is arranging to have Cordelia murdered (5.3.17-39). Tom’s Christianity and the fool’s philosophy seem to have combined to convince Lear that a wise man cannot resist the ubiquitous influence of self-love, but must simply strive to restrain his own pride, while focusing humbly on his intimate attachments. Ironically, however, although self-restraint and humility no doubt facilitate the constant trust and care which sustains personal relationships, in the political world they tend to sap the ability of rulers to defend the very order that ultimately safeguards these relationships. Self-lovers are not just, and their predations can only be countered by emulating their self-assertion, and at times, their wiliness.

Shakespeare’s overall suggestion is therefore that, in order to create a stable enclave in which self-love is prevented from disrupting constant attachments, just rulers generally need to supplement their natural patriotism and compassion with conventional codes of honour and piety which encourage them to oversee a system of legal and, as a final resort, military deterrents in a robustly self-assertive and at times cunningly manipulative manner. The murder of Cordelia reminds both Lear and the audience of the need for the proud, noble spiritedness which the kings has seemingly renounced: he implicitly criticises his own new-found meekness when he declares that he “might have sav’d her” and that he “kill’d the slave that was a-hanging thee,” even emerging from his grief and recently assumed humility sufficiently to boast of the days when, with his “good, biting falchion [he] would have made them skip” (5.3.271, 5.3.275-78). The ongoing tension between Lear’s Christian and quasi-philosophical meekness and his natural and honourable desire for retribution is highlighted when, after “preach[ing]” to Gloucester with deceptive humility that the only appropriate response to “this great stage of fools” is to try to restrain oneself “patient[ly]” from “wawl[ing] and cry[ing]” like a baby, he is then suddenly overtaken by a fierce urge to “kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill” his oppressors (4.6.178-87).

In this way, a number of factors combine to depoliticise Lear. In general, both the fool and poor Tom overrate the power of self-love, since they see it as barely controllable even on a purely personal level. The only material remedy which they offer, which is that each individual should strive to restrain their own pride, not only side-lines the political sphere, but tends to conflict with the confident self-assertion which political authority demands: Lear’s Christianised enlightenment leads him to focus on alienated spiritual states rather than vicious behaviour, and on tenderness rather than retribution.

To repeat, Shakespeare presents Lear’s ‘enlightenment’ as simply exchanging a less politically useful set of conventional beliefs–which are themselves partly derived from pious belief, however much they present themselves as entirely based on nature–for his code of nobility and his traditional faith in a just God. If, as I have argued, Shakespeare uses clothing to represent such codes, it may be significant that the ‘enlightened’ Lear substitutes a crown of weeds and flowers for the one which symbolised his conventional authority (4.6.180-83). After doffing this alternative ‘crown’ with a sardonic comment on the limited protection which it offers– “a good block”–Lear remarks that “it were a delicate stratagem, to shoe a troop of horse with felt,” adding that he nevertheless wishes to “put’t in proof,” so that he can “kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill,” presumably after having “stol’n” upon his enemies with his softly shod cavalry (4.6.185-87). Like the flowery crown, the felt shoes might appear and feel more natural than horse-shoes, and are indeed originally organic, unlike the metallic objects that they replace, yet both are in fact still artifices, and ones, moreover, which compromise Lear’s ability to enforce his will. Thus, the prescient playwright conceals a warning in his play against a set of ideas which were arguably to become the dominant intellectual force as the Enlightenment took root, which purport to base society on nature for the first time, but are in fact derived from an impoverished analysis of the human soul.

The teachings of poor Tom and the fool highlight the disjunction between statesmen and private citizens, since in both cases they encourage the humility and moderation which trusting attachments inevitably demand, even as they sap the sublimated pride which may be so useful in public life. Unlike the fool’s teachings, however, Edgar’s manipulations are far from being apolitical. His actions imply that truly passionate and thoughtful rulers should accept the disjunction between their own natures and that of their subjects, and seek to reinforce conventional beliefs which promote contentment and social cohesion, even though they themselves are completely unmoved by the sublimated pride to which these beliefs appeal. Having little acquaintance with the fool, Edgar surely never anticipated that his teachings could ultimately bolster a nihilistic scepticism which might prove detrimental to such cohesion. By contrast, the foresightful playwright conceals a warning against a set of ideas which were arguably to become the dominant intellectual force in the West as the Enlightenment took root. At the heart of these ideas is the assumption–shared by the fool and Edmund, and encouraged by poor Tom–that human nature is dominated by the basest or most bestial impulses, an assumption which is potentially detrimental to the moral authority of legal and political institutions. Shakespeare implicitly advises that the humble, sympathetic egalitarianism which post-Enlightenment societies might put forward as a substitute for such authority cannot protect regimes against the inevitable incursions of self-love.

Conclusion

Shakespeare’s aim in this play is to explore the essential nature of politics. In the state of nature, as outlined in the scenes on the heath, the patriarchs who become the first monarchs are naturally motivated to rule by a sympathetic urge to protect their circle of attachments from the ongoing threat posed by self-love. However, although the underlying natural function of the regimes which emerge in this way is therefore to provide a safe enclave within which intimate attachments may flourish, they inevitably come to rely on the support of conventional codes of honour and moral duty, and, most importantly, a faith in a just cosmos, sustained by divine providence. These codes may be “nothing” when considered from a strictly philosophical perspective–the fact that this word occurs thirty-six times in the play, while “nature” and its variants are used forty-seven times, is a sign that Shakespeare’s theme requires him to distinguish carefully between conventional illusions and natural desires–but they generally encourage the elite to display the noble assertiveness which enables them to defend their regimes and implement the laws that control self-love, while ensuring that the populace defers dutifully to these laws. In traditional regimes, as is shown by the confused rebukes which Lear hurls at Regan, the self-denying, loyal service that is instilled by codes of piety, duty and honour may merge indistinguishably with the demands which are naturally imposed by intimate attachments.

Such codes gain their power from the way in which they sublimate self-love into a form which serves these spontaneous demands, thus appealing simultaneously to two powerful, constituents of human nature, which would otherwise conflict. Conventional conceptions of nobility and virtue ensure that the desire to distinguish oneself in the eyes of others expresses itself in a manner that is broadly just, rather than in the form of tyrannical ambition, while traditional religious belief harnesses self-regard to support the political order, both by ascribing to just and unjust actions a cosmic significance and by promising that secular justice is supplemented by divine sanctions. Indeed, piety is perhaps the most powerful of these conventions, since it allows just rulers to strengthen their regimes by presenting what are in fact simply ingenious efforts to construct enclaves of order within an arbitrary universe as fulfilling a divine plan, as Lear plans to do with his putative house building programme. Shakespeare uses the love test as his central example of the noble lies by which prudent policies may be naturalised in the eyes of the populace. As this exercise would have shown, if it had been carried through in the way that Lear planned, even sincere feeling itself may at times be usefully exploited to serve a political purpose.

Shakespeare explores the composition of the traditional polis in order to compare and contrast the attitudes of three groups of characters to the conventional beliefs outlined above -four, if you count the extremely small group of philosophical rulers. Based on the behaviour of Lear’s hundred knights and Cornwall’s three servants, we may infer that a third of the populace are, like Kent, Gloucester, Albany, Cordelia and Lear himself, motivated by a robust combination of conventional beliefs and natural attachments. The despair that both Gloucester and Lear show when they are forced to question their faith in the gods shows that piety is vital to their well-being, since it satisfies their proud urge to invest just actions with a cosmic significance. Judging again by Lear’s knights and Cornwall’s servants, most of the remaining two thirds are less passionate and more self-regarding than this first group, and so are more prone to conform to tyranny. Nevertheless, the pious horror and sympathy subsequently displayed by the two servants who were complicit in the blinding of Gloucester suggests that in a just regime, the self-regard of this second group would normally be kept in check by conventional principles, supported by a somewhat impoverished capacity to form attachments, and presumably, as always, by an expedient conformity. As a general rule, this group would simply conform to the regime of the day, whether just or tyrannical.

By contrast with both these groups of characters, a third, much smaller group of egregious narcissists respects authority only when it is underwritten by military power. These are happy to subvert or manipulate both the natural attachments and the artificial conventions which underpin the civic order in order to pursue their ambitions. They are hampered, however, partly by their pursuit of social distinction itself–it is this pursuit that exposes Edmund to Edgar’s manipulations–but most of all by their passionate attachments, which are bound to exert a powerful, potentially humbling influence, even if these attachments are primarily sensual. This third group may be further subdivided into those whose self-love is, for imponderable reasons, naturally dominant, and those such as Edmund, who have been distorted by their environment, sometimes as a result of the collateral damage caused by the salutary conventions themselves, and who therefore may retain a residual capacity to form sympathetic ties.

The opening conversation of the play, which, as is his wont, Shakespeare uses to introduce his main theme, hints that the play will explore the limitations of social convention as well as its uses, since Gloucester’s disastrous ostracism of Edmund is implicitly contrasted with the king’s salutary pretence of valuing Cornwall and Albany equally. Particularly in the absence of an authoritative hierarchy, the just characters are vulnerable to tyrannical ambition, not only because they assume that narcissists must share their own capacity to form sympathetic attachments, but precisely because their habitual convictions lead them to see self-love as an unnatural or “monstrous” distortion of a cosmic order, a view which leads them to minimise its innate power and pervasive influence. Piety and habitual codes of nobility lead the spirited Kent, Cordelia and Lear himself to display a noble, direct self-assertion which is counterproductive in unstable times, however useful it may be in defending just regimes, while, conversely, the respect which the moderate Albany and Gloucester demonstrate for the established hierarchies, both secular and celestial, imposes gentlemanly restraints, and even at times a passive fatalism, which hamper their capacity to resist self-love. The chaos which descends after the king’s virtual abdication reveals that the old regime has been much more reliant on his prudent manipulations and careful construction of military deterrents than either he or the other just characters have appreciated.

Whereas the just characters may well be induced to rule for lengthy periods, since their natural patriotism is supported by codes of piety and nobility, their compassionate love for their country is not sufficiently intense to impel them to do so entirely willingly, since it is adulterated by self-love, albeit in a highly sublimated form: it is significant that in the course of the play, three of these characters either decline or surrender the crown. The conventional principles by which Lear is habituated to rule are not sufficiently authoritative to override completely his intuition that his deepest needs are fulfilled through trusting personal intimacies. Moreover, he, and no doubt many just rulers of his ilk, tend to be frustrated, both for natural and conventionally moral reasons, by the hypocrisies and accommodations which political life inevitably demands, particularly because their efforts might appear to be requited merely by the gratifications of “pomp” and popular adulation, which they may find superficially enticing, but ultimately insubstantial. Lear’s catastrophic anger with Cordelia in the opening scene is a measure of this frustration, as is Albany’s intense reluctance to take up arms against Cordelia’s forces. Such frustrations are natural to an extent, as is implied by the fact that they are experienced even by the passionate Edgar as he attempts to convince Gloucester and Lear that nature is ultimately just, but, by contrast with Edgar, the conventionally just characters are hampered not only by the high value which they place on sincere and trusting attachments, but by their pious and honourable principles. Lear is perhaps typical of most just rulers in traditional regimes in that he himself subscribes to the very conventional beliefs which his position impels him to manipulate.

By contrast, the portrayal of Edgar shows that politics is a natural vocation for a few very passionate and thoughtful individuals. Having recognised the futility of pride in all its forms, they are free to derive satisfaction from a variety of sympathetic ties, whether patriotic or personal. Although their lives are also inevitably centred on personal relationships, as is implied by the intensity of Edgar’s response to Gloucester’s injuries, their propensity to form attachments is sufficiently vigorous to spill over into the political sphere in an entirely spontaneous manner. Under extreme circumstances their political aims must override their personal attachments, but generally they will be able to negotiate a compromise between the two. Thus, in what is arguably the most Platonic of his plays, Shakespeare implicitly takes issue with Plato’s insistence that the philosopher has no desire to rule, because he starts from the intuition that fulfilment is primarily to be gained through passionate attachments, rather than through the love of wisdom.[[47]](#endnote-47)

Edgar represents a fourth, very small group of deeply passionate and thoughtful individuals, who are likely to rule not only with absolute justice, unadulterated by any proclivity for “pomp,” but with shrewd prudence. Such characters are more able to exploit conventional beliefs even than the third group of potential tyrants–as Edgar shows at the end of the play when he manipulates his brother into accepting his challenge–since they have emancipated themselves from the raw ambition which ties these latter to an arbitrary hierarchy, as well as from the sublimated pride which drives conventional piety and nobility. The pious doctrines which Edgar promulgates not only shield Gloucester and Lear from the random harshness of nature, which they and many others of their ilk find almost impossible to bear, but will doubtless also reinforce the just order which he is about to institute at the end of the play. Thus, Shakespeare implicitly argues not only that regimes are originally seeded by natural sympathies, but that on rare occasions they may be regulated entirely by these sympathies -although, paradoxically, the natural ruler is likely to manipulate conventional beliefs in a particularly shameless way, precisely because he has freed himself from such beliefs.

Shakespeare also shows that factors within a just regime may themselves be responsible for liberating self-love, and indeed may perhaps ultimately represent more of a threat than narcissistic ambition, which is ultimately self-defeating for the reasons given above. Firstly, sceptical philosophy may undermine salutary conventions. Unlike Shakespeare’s own play, which carefully disguises its deeper argument, the fool’s views directly challenge the assumption that self-love is a distortion of nature and an offence against the divine order, presenting it simply as a pervasive, arbitrary force, like “the wind and the rain.” While Shakespeare himself covertly endorses this analysis, he shows that the fool is wrong both to express it directly and to conclude from it that society cannot protect itself.

The fool’s eventual desertion of Lear implies that those of a philosophical bent often tend to prioritise prudent expedience over sympathetic attachments, which means that their analysis of human nature may not encompass the intrinsic benefits of just and compassionate rule. Moreover, the fool’s preference for the humble domestic virtues of self-knowledge and self-restraint over the proud and assertive dignity of just monarchs shows that he, in common perhaps with many philosophers of his sceptical ilk, fails to understand that the stability of the domestic enclaves which he so values is itself ultimately dependent on the capacity of the political elite to resist the incursions of potential tyrants. Thus, like Plato before him, although for slightly different reasons, Shakespeare criticises philosophers who attempt to eschew politics.

Quite apart from the fool’s overly pessimistic claim that self-love is uncontrollable, his analysis undermines one of the key assumptions upon which any just legal system must be founded: retributive justice must attribute moral agency to offenders and an innate capacity for guilt, but, unmoved as they are by the imperatives of love, which form the natural foundation of normative social codes, egregious self-lovers could not actually be said to make free moral choices. Nevertheless, society simply has to assume that they deserve punishment, since it is the passionate desire for retribution which generally drives the legal system, and allows it to fulfil what is in reality its most vital political function, namely, the establishment of clear deterrents.

Secondly, it would seem that in some contexts certain types of conventional belief may actively undermine the laws which sustain the civic order. The strength of Christianity is that it is a uniquely powerful means of reinforcing faith in divine justice. Rather than teaching that this justice is immanent in the world, a doctrine which is always likely to be challenged by the arbitrary harshness of nature, it limits divine providence to a single act of redemptive mercy, while maintaining that adversities of all sorts, including the depredations of self-love, are originally triggered by the proud self-assertion which led humanity to alienate itself from heaven. However, although this account offers useful reassurances to the populace, as it does to Lear, since it provides a more effective argument for divine justice than religions which attempt to present the gods as micromanaging an arbitrary universe, it is bound to hamper the rulers themselves for the following reasons.

In order to present self-love as ineluctable, and therefore suffering as generally deserved, Christianity, particularly in its Protestant forms, effectively psychologises both vice and virtue: thus, the pride which alienates the soul from God becomes the supreme evil, while a humble acceptance of one’s own innate sinfulness and consequent reliance on Christ’s love becomes the ultimate virtue. Not only does Christianity therefore tend to divert attention away from vicious action, which is of course the main focus of the law, but, like the fool’s philosophy, not to mention Edmund’s, the assumption that all are guilty of original sin tends to erode the difference between criminals and judges. The dignified indignation which traditionally motivates just rulers and judges could now easily be dismissed as merely an expression of pride, especially by contrast with Christ’s humble sacrifices. Moreover, not only are the institutions which are designed to combat self-love now easily assumed to be either ineffectual or corrupt, but secular justice is weakened by the fact that it is no longer seen as being supplemented by an immanent providence. The overall thrust of these doctrines is that one should concentrate on aligning oneself humbly with God’s redemptive love, rather than on protecting or correcting others through political engagement.

Thus, Christianity might easily combine with a philosophical critique of political engagement to encourage the ruling elite to prioritise the self-restraint and generosity which personal attachments demand above the proud virtues of public life, even though these attachments are ultimately reliant on precisely these virtues for their protection. In traditional religions, by contrast, the gods are presented both as modelling and supplementing spirited retribution in a manner which generally reinforces just regimes. This type of piety may not provide such a convincing defence of divine providence as Christianity, and on occasion it may help to instil either naïve overconfidence or passive fatalism in those who are so disposed, but, unlike certain Christian doctrines, it is not fundamentally incompatible with the virtues which are required for public life.

Shakespeare understands that Christian and sceptical philosophy might work together to usher in a potentially disruptive enlightenment. It is no coincidence that Edmund’s and the fool’s emphasis on the primacy of self-interest is typical of the political philosophers of the early enlightenment, such as Machiavelli, who prepared the way for Hobbes and Locke. The portrayal of Lear at the end of the play contains a warning, carefully disguised for obvious reasons, that it is dangerous to strip away the conventional beliefs which reinforce authority and encourage dutiful service. Shakespeare suggests that these are likely to be replaced, not with a truly philosophical analysis, but with a misleadingly reductive, or even nihilistic, account of human nature, which is essentially a secularised version of the doctrine of original sin, generated by those, like Edmund and the fool, whose thought simply reflects their own stunted natures. The actual truth, which is that human society is the theatre of a permanent struggle between self-love and attachments, is too intricate to be amenable to general dissemination.

Shakespeare would perhaps not be surprised to learn that in modern, post-Christian liberal democracies, which are of course founded on principles ultimately derived from the Enlightenment, the majority might agree with Lear’s scornful account of political “authority”– “a dog’s obey’d in office” (4.6.158-59)–assuming that any claim to moral superiority is bound to be fraudulent and rooted in pride. He sees that, having lost faith in the conventional codes which encouraged deference and dignified self-assertion, we might come to prefer the humble, sympathetic approach of Lear at the end of the play to the spirited and prudent authority which he embodies at the start. However, the play implies that such an approach could never form the basis of political rule. For Shakespeare, those in positions of authority must always be capable of assuming a stance of dignified moral indignation, even, presumably, in an era when the traditional codes of honour and piety which used to encourage such a stance have been dismantled. Moreover, leaders will always feel the need both to conceal their real attachments and antipathies and to portray themselves as more assured than they might actually feel, just as Lear does in the opening scene.

1. Harry Jaffa, “The Limits of Politics,” in *Shakespeare’s Politics*, Allan Bloom with Harry V. Jaffa (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964): 124. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Jaffa: 120. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Jaffa: 114. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For Lear’s restraint and patience see Helen Gardner, “*King Lear*,” in “*King Lear*”*: Critical Essays*, ed. Kenneth Muir (London: Routledge, 1984): 267. For a general defence of Lear’s behaviour at the start of the play, see A. C. Bradley, “*King Lear*,” in *Shakespeare: “King Lear,”* Casebook Series, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1969): 85-86. For his discrimination in favouring Kent and Cordelia, see Jaffa: 119. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Jaffa: 116-28. For an examination of the issue of primogeniture, see Jaffa: 140. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Jaffa: 128. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Jaffa: 137. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. At best, she could be accused of “indiscreet simplicity”: William Hazlitt, “*King Lear*,” in “*King Lear*”*: Critical Essays*: 14.; or of being “exceptionally sincere and unbending”: A. C. Bradley in *Shakespeare: “King Lear”*: 86. At worst, she displays “pride and sullenness”: S. T. Coleridge, “Notes on *King Lear*,” in *Shakespeare: “King Lear”*: 38 and 108. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Jaffa: 130. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Jaffa: 135. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Shakespeare follows Plato, I will argue, in believing that philosophers should conform outwardly to conventional opinion. See Thomas Pangle’s introduction to Leo Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983): 11-20. The fullest account of this issue is to be found in Leo Strauss, *Xenophon’s Socrates* (London: Cornell University Press, 1972). See also Strauss’s Preface to *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968). For the tension between natural right and political right, see Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1953): 151-53.. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Stampfer, “The Catharsis of *King Lear*,” in “*King* *Lear”:* *Critical Essays*: 210. See also Gardner, “*King Lear*,” in “*King Lear”:* *Critical Essays*: 254; Enid Welsford, “The Fool in *King Lear*,” in *Shakespeare: “King Lear”*: 138-40. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. A. W. Schlegel, “Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature,” in *Shakespeare: “King Lear”*: 33. Stampfer in the article cited above argues that the play “destroys any basis for providential justice, [but] would seem to vindicate…the bond of human nature”: 211. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Stampfer: 212. See also Gardner: 265; Wilson Knight, “*King Lear* and the Comedy of the Grotesque,” in *Shakespeare: “King Lear”*: 133; and Maynard Mack, “*King Lear*: Action and World,” in “*King Lear*”*: Critical Essays*: 243. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. This essay assumes that the play is covertly sceptical regarding divine providence or any form of cosmic justice: see Stampfer: 208-09, and William R. Elton, “*King Lear” and the Gods* (Lexington: Kentucky University Press, 1988): 338. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Bridget Gellert Lyons, “The Subplot as Simplification,” in *Some Facets of “King Lear”: Essays in Prismatic Criticism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974): 36. For the ironic juxtaposition of Cordelia’s death with Albany’s prayer, see Empson’s view, cited by Kenneth Muir in his epilogue to *“King Lear”: Critical Essays*: 283. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. A. W. Schlegel: 32; see also F. D. Hoeniger, “The Artist Exploring the Primitive,” in *Some Facets of “King Lear”: Essays in Prismatic Criticism*: 92-93. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. For the importance of natural bonds of love and pity in the play, see Nancy R. Lindheim, “*King Lear* as Pastoral Tragedy,” in *Some Facets of “King Lear”: Essays in Prismatic Criticism*: 177-80. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Jaffa: 143. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Edgar continues this effort at the end of the play: 5.3.313. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. For a classic expression of this view, see Bradley: 113. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. In Stampfer’s words, “hierarchical propriety,” which he calls “the central concept of the play,” is “a necessity for life, like sun and water.” It is “the bond of nature, made up at once of propriety and charity”: *“King Lear”*: *Critical Essays*: 211. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. For “ripeness” as synonymous with fulfilment, see Levin, 161, and as synonymous with self-forgetting love, see L. C. Knights, “*King Lear,*” in “*King Lear*”*: Critical Essays*: 186-87. Orwell is surely correct to see this famous remark as “an un-Christian sentiment: “Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool,” in “*King Lear*”*: Critical Essays*: 164. See also Rosalie L. Colie, “Biblical Echo,” in *Some Facets of “King Lear”: Essays in Prismatic Criticism*: 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Plato of course declares that philosophers would have to be forced to rule in his ideal city. See Leo Strauss, *The City and the Man*: 123-28. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. F. T. Flahiff, “Edgar: Once and Future King,” in *Some Facets of “King Lear”: Essays in Prismatic Criticism*: 230-33. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Jaffa: 124. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Levin: 160. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Strauss, *The City and the Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally and Co., 1964): 125. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. See Strauss’s essay on Plato in *History of Political Philosophy*, ed. L. Strauss and J. Cropsey (Chicago: Rand McNally College Publishing co., 1963): 18-21; and Strauss, *The City and the Man*: 102. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Levin notes that “Edgar has proved to be as good a stage-manager as Edmund”: “The Heights and the Depths: A Scene from *King Lear*,” in “*King Lear*”*: Critical Essays*: 159. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. For Edgar’s resilience and philosophy, see Gardner: 271. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. The pervasive use of sartorial symbolism in the play has been recognised by several critics. See, for instance, Leonard Tennenhouse, “The Theatre of Punishment,” in “*King Lear”: New Casebooks*, ed. Kiernan Ryan (New York: Palgrave, 1993): 67; and Maurice Charney, “Nakedness and Clothes,” in *Some Facets of “King Lear”: Essays in Prismatic Criticism*: 87. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Flahiff: 232. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. This list provides further evidence for the view that the astrological references in the play are designed to disguise Shakespeare’s ongoing discussion of the utility of pious credulity. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. For Tom’s conflation of lice and demons, see Levin: 151. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Elton: 30-32: “for Luther, indeed, God is not only hidden but angry, beyond reconciliation with fallen man.” Similarly, for Calvin, “God is not to be understood but obeyed and his apparent injustices swallowed.” [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Colie: 137. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Jaffa: 143. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. By contrast, the more sophisticated Edgar’s remark that there is “matter and impertinency mix’d, reason in madness,” in Lear’s critique of political authority perhaps hints that he might accept the king’s premise that self-love is natural, while questioning his conclusion that authority and justice are therefore ineffectual shams (4.6.174-75). [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. For the parallel between Lear and the enlightened Edmund at this point, see L. C. Knights: 171. For a penetrating analysis of the role played by Machiavelli in precipitating the Enlightenment, see Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Seattle: Washington University Press, 1958): especially 132-33, 296-97. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. See Leo Strauss, *Political Philosophy*, ed. Hilail Gildin (New York: Pegasus, 1975): 83. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. John Holloway argues that these thoughts are ultimately derived from St. Paul: “*King Lear*,” in “*King Lear*”*: Critical Essays*: 216. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Far from being redemptive, as many have argued–see, for instance, Bradley: 97–Arthur Sewell sees Lear’s breakdown as “moral, not psychological,” “the soul’s abandonment”: “Character and Society in Shakespeare,” in “*King Lear*”*: Critical Essays*: 141. For Lear’s loss of faith in retributive justice, both secular and divine, see Elton: 109. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Allan Bloom makes the point that the Enlightenment deprives civil society of the “myths which can make citizens of private men,” which in the past have reinforced deference and provided “grounds for resisting, in the name of the common good…private desires,” substituting instead a misplaced belief that “rationality consists in the discovery of the best means of satisfying desire.” See the “Interpretive Essay” appended to his translation of *The Republic of Plato*, 2nd edition (New York: Basic Books, 1991): 365-69. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Shakespeare may well have Montaigne in mind as his chief example of the sort of free-thinking philosophy which could combine with the theology of the Reformation to instil the radical humility and the tendency to psychologise sin which he sees as detrimental to a dignified and spirited political authority, capable of deterring self-love through stern retribution: “There is no man, good as he may be, who, if all his thoughts and actions were submitted to the laws, would not deserve hanging ten times in his life” -Montaigne, *Essais*, ed. Maurice Rat (Paris: Garnier, 1952), bk. 3, chap. 9. Montaigne accepts the doctrine of *Deus absconditus*, arguing that we can have no conception either of God’s anger or His love: Elton: 31. He sees laws as arbitrary impositions, maintained by habit and “made by fooles”: Elton: 230-31. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Barbara Everett sees this speech as child-like: “The New King Lear,” in “*King Lear*”: *Critical Essays*: 194. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Contrast Plato, *The Republic*, 517c-521b. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)