Poverty and its "many folds" in *King Lear*

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Résumé : Cet article étudie comment Shakespeare utilise la pauvreté dans *Le Roi Lear*. Jouant avec virtuosité de cette dernière comme pierre de touche, catalyseur et révélateur, ainsi qu'avec toutes les facettes du terme, il la place d'abord dans un contexte contemporain par le biais de Poor Tom O'Bedlam, personnage familier et emblématique de l'époque, pour dénoncer l'injustice sociale. Détruits, confrontés tant au dénuement physique que moral de leur entourage, Lear, Gloucester et Edgar en arrivent progressivement à remettre en question leurs valeurs matérialistes, voire le recours à la raison pure, dénuée de charité et d'émotion, avant d'adhérer à une vision du monde qui passe par le ressenti et dont les valeurs authentiques et riches sont l'empathie et la fraternité humaine. De simples possédants, ils accèdent à leur humanité, passant d'un statut social à leur identité. La vraie pauvreté n'est pas celle que l'on croit. La langue de Shakespeare suit la même évolution, passant de l'emphase poétique au dépouillement, se désarticulant en folie prophétique, pour parvenir enfin au silence d'une Cordelia toute en émotion et en vérité. Pièce sombre entre toutes dans l'univers shakespearien, où l'auteur met à nu l'ultime pauvreté de la société et du genre humain.

Mots clés : pauvreté, matérialisme, raison, ressenti, justice, apprentissage, empathie, féminin.

Lear: What art thou?
Kent: A very honest-hearted fellow, and as poor as the king
Lear: If thou be'st as poor for a subject as he is for a King,
thou art poor enough (I, 4, 18-22)[1]

In a time when skepticism and religious order are warring for his contemporaries' hearts and minds, when the established Elizabethan world order is being subjected to the assault of individualism, Shakespeare, himself bridging two reigns, takes Lear from the apex of deluded and self-deluding royalty to the nadir of a self-aware "poor, bare, forked animal" (III, 4, 105-6). As on a giant chessboard, the play plucks a king from his court and moves him to a barren, storm-beset heath, turning him into a lowly pawn of men and Gods alike, subject to the latter's "dreadful pudder" (III, 2, 50) overhead. There, willfully stripping himself of all remnants of royal raiment, Lear gives his fool precedence and embraces the poorest of the poor, the unhinged Tom O'Bedlam, in dawning recognition of the injustice suffered by those reduced to such dire straits, but, even more powerfully, in the sudden revelation that such is the human condition and therefore his own.

Poverty is central to a text that revolves around the interplay between "all", "nothing" and "something", between price, value and worth, between clothes and nakedness. But it is central in different ways, as Shakespeare plays with the concept of poverty and of the poor on different levels. "Poor" is certainly used in its physical sense of suffering from penury, and in that sense, it operates

[1] Shakespeare, *King Lear,* Kenneth Muir, ed., London, Methuen & Co, *The Arden Shakespeare*, 1972, I, 4, p. 18-22. All subsequent quotations from *King Lear* are from this edition.

within a contemporary context[2] and surfaces social injustice, but it also conveys any pitiable condition, whether material or not and can encompass the sufferings of all outcasts, including Edmund's as a bastard. "Poor" can also denote a dearth of qualities, be they physical or moral. Finally, as a central mechanism in the play, poverty functions as a touchstone of worth, as a catalyst of moral growth and almost as a mode of revelation, as the main characters, through penury and deprivation of their former rights, shed not only their appurtenances, but also their former selves to be reborn to new values.

In its first and most concrete acceptance, we shall explore how poverty in *King Lear* exposes social injustice, then how it more broadly prompts Lear to question long assumed tenets of materialism, causality, reason and indeed the very place of man in the universe, ultimately leading him to an alternative set of values, which displaces such accepted *modi operandi* as judging and having, in favour of feeling and being. These new values in turn redefine the meaning of poverty, conjuring a world view in which the materially dispossessed may not be the poorest, and leading to a bitter indictment of the world and of the human condition which are inescapably ours.

On a purely tangible level, an aged king is in short order taken from the apex of wealth to the nadir of poverty. He is precipitated from the enjoyment of possessions encompassing all that he freely gave his daughters[3] to a state of utter destitution, where the best offer is: "gracious my Lord, hard by here is a hovel; some friendship will it lend you 'gainst the tempest" (III, 2, 61-2). In less than three acts, the play takes him from castle to barren heath, from sumptuous raiment to near nakedness, from his splendid bespoken retinue of a hundred knights to a following "dis-quantitied", in Goneril's choice word, to his Fool – "but who is with him?" "none but the Fool" (III, 1, 15-6), shortly to be joined by a serving man (the disguised Kent) and the poor, mad, Tom O'Bedlam. The King has indeed become, in the Fool's words: "an 0 without a figure" (I, 4, 189-90).

Edgar, the Duke of Gloucester's lawful heir, follows a parallel precipitous downward course, coming under a death sentence against which his best recourse is to lead the life of "Poor Tom". "Poor Tom O'Bedlam" was an archetypal figure to the spectators, linking poverty and madness, but Edgar is also poor in the sense of "pitiable", in that, unfairly accused, he has been despoiled of his father's love, and robbed of his worldly status and inheritance. Most immediately and tangibly onstage, he is reduced to penury, with but a blanket to gird his loins and no roof but a tree or a hovel:

> […] and am bethought
> To take the basest and most poorest shape
> That ever penury, in contempt of man,
> Brought near to beast; my face I'll grime with filth,
> Blanket my loins, […]
> And with presented nakedness outface
> The winds and persecutions of the sky. (II, 3, 6-12)

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[2] It is not our intent here to duplicate excellent studies on poverty in the age of Shakespeare: William Carroll's work, *Fat King, Lean Beggar*, which we shall later reference, offers such an analysis as well as a rich bibliography on the topic.

[3] Bountifully described in Goneril's third alone as: "Of all these bounds, […]' / With shadowy forests and with champains rich'd / With plenteous rivers and wide-skirted meads (I, 1, 62-4).

Lear too will gradually discard his royal garb – "off, off you lendings" (III, 4, 106-7) – and brave the harsh weather in scant raiment – "crown'd with rank fumiter and furrow-weeds" (IV, 4, 3) –, his very language symbolically stripped down from its early majestic, cadenced periods – "Meantime, we shall express our darker purpose" (I, 1, 35) – and later impassioned tirades – "O! Reason not the need; our basest beggars / Are in the poorest thing superfluous" (II, 4, 262-3) to the utterly plain and pathetic, almost childlike: "Pray you, undo this button: thank you Sir" (V, 3, 308).

And in but a short while, it will be Gloucester's turn to join the rank of the poor and dispossessed, publicly blinded in one of the cruelest, most controversial scenes in theatrical history, stripped of his title and belongings in favour of his undeserving bastard son, and tauntingly sent to smell his way to Dover.

On a purely material level, in a reverse "rags to riches" tale, poverty in every possible guise thus succeeds untold riches for the eponymous hero, for Gloucester, cast out like a blind beggar, and for Edgar, as Tom O'Bedlam, in the first stage of the latter's "Once and Future King"[4] or "The Prince and the Pauper"[5] apprenticeship. In no other Shakespearian drama is poverty so dramatically and centrally featured.

What is Shakespeare's purpose here? To the Elizabethan spectator, the sight of a Tom O'Bedlam onstage, generically alluded to as "the Bedlam" by Cornwall's second servant at the end of Act III, in reference to the Bedlam hospital which housed and treated poor lunatics, was not simply metaphorical. Increasing numbers of homeless and displaced vagrants were seen both in the countryside and in the cities, bringing about Queen Elizabeth's Poor Relief Act in 1601, a few years before the play was written. While a major progress over the initial Vagabond Act of 1495, in that it distinguished between "settled" and "vagrant" poor and made parishes responsible for the care of their resident poor, many parishes sought to lower their costs, thus paradoxically inducing migration, as the "vagrants" were shuttled from parish to parish, a tangible dark side of the political and social corpus. William Carroll points out that they were "considered a physical threat as well as a philosophical one, because their very nature was to cross boundaries, to transgress categories of all kinds".[6] Such mobility was particularly unsettling as it co-existed with another kind of disruptive mobility, namely the ascent of a new and wealthy Merchant class, seen as a threat to the established feudal order. In the same way that the Poor Laws ineffectually sought to contain the movement of the poor, a succession of Sumptuary Laws were passed by Henry VIII and his successors to freeze upward mobility, prescribing the raiment allowed to each social station, in an attempt to bar rising wealth from appropriating the insignia of established power.

Shakespeare clearly invites these two contemporary, disruptive issues into his play, the first with the archetypal character of Poor Tom, the Bedlamite, the second by anchoring the play in an uneasy awareness of changing times, in which the idealistic feudal values of a Cordelia, true to her "bond", are challenged by the ascent of a more mobile social class and of emerging individualism, largely epitomized by Edmund. And even if, in Rosalie Colie's words, "the moral weight of the play comes down decisively with the advocates of the old values", it is "not without having hesitated long

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[4] T. H. White, *The Once and Future King*, London, Collins, 1958.

[5] Mark Twain, *The Prince and the Pauper*, Boston, James Osgood and Co, 1882.

[6] William C. Carroll, *Fat King, Lean Beggar: Representations of Poverty in the Age of Shakespeare*, Ithaca (NY), Cornell University Press, 1996, p. 6.

enough to show how crucially those values fell short".[7] In a way, in striking contrast with the supposed stability of the medieval world order, the entire play is about displacement, with each of the characters on the move in one way or another, bent on conquest or divestment, or being evicted from his former status or dwelling. How some of the main characters bring about, and even more importantly, react, to their displacement, what they learn or fail to learn, is what may give some insight as to Shakespeare's purpose.

The first shocking divestment is voluntary. In the opening act, Lear divests himself of his kingdom in what could have been an attempt at distributive justice, but is merely a mockery of the latter since, not only does he show no concern whatsoever for his subjects or the underprivileged among them, but in fact retains with one hand what he is making a show of liberally bestowing with the other. In holding onto his retinue, title and privileges – "only we shall retain / The name and all th'addition to a king" (I, 1, 134-5), and divesting mostly the cares of ruling – "since now we will divest us both of rule / Interest of territory, *cares of state*", (I, 1, 48-9, italics my emphasis), he is betraying his bond as protector of his people. In fact, his renunciation can symbolically be read as a deposition of power and responsibility by a failing feudal order.

He in effect wishes to remain a king without having to act like one and, contrary to his self-depiction, behaves very much in a "having", rather than a "giving" mode. In a travesty of "distribution", at the very moment in which he perceives himself as engaging in an act of utmost renunciation and generosity, he has renounced nothing but his duty and potentially forsaken none but his dependents. A Machiavellian reading could even suspect him of stepping down with full regalia and control of his departure's modalities to avoid being forcefully deposed as he ages, a supposition borne out by Regan's exclamation: "and in good time you gave it" (II, 4, 248).

As a consequence of his utter misreading of his daughters' professions of love, such precautions prove of no avail and the king will be cast out, largely destitute and friendless, and made to suffer the woes of the poorest in the land. And it is that very state of destitution which, at the symbolic heart and literal midpoint of the play (Act III, Scene 4 out of 7), becomes the catalyst of his awakening to the plight of those around him and more generally to the state of rampant social injustice to which his wealth and status had hitherto blinded him. After passionately invoking the Gods for retribution upon his daughters, his thoughts take an entirely different turn:

> Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are
> That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm
> How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
> Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
> From seasons such as these? (III, 4, 28-33)

Nor does he shy away from the burning question of who is responsible for this sad state of affairs or take refuge in evasive generalities, but awakens to, and fully accepts, his own responsibility in the matter – "O! I have ta'en too little care of this" (III, 4, 32-3) – even going the length of questioning the Gods' role in this matter – "And show the Heavens more just" (III, 4, 36).

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[7] Rosalie L. Colie, "*King Lear* and the 'Crisis' of the Aristocracy", Rosalie L. Colie, F. T. Flahiff, eds., *Some Facets of King Lear: Essays in Prismatic Criticism,* University of Toronto Press, 1974, p. 216.

At this precise point of dawning recognition, he encounters Edgar, his diametric opposite in the social scale, or more accurately, if he only knew it, a young potential King, undergoing similar trials (in Edgar's words: "He childed as I father'd" (III, 6, 108)). The shock of such an encounter jolts his sanity further and leads him "to question the validity of the whole social hierarchy"[8] and particularly that of justice as rendered throughout the land:

> Change places, and handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief? […]
> A dog's obey'd in office. […] Plate sin with gold,
> And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks;
> Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it. (IV, 6, 151-65)

Those in power are flattered and lied to: "to say 'ay' and 'no' to everything that I said!" (IV, 6, 98-99). Feelings themselves are corrupted by power and wealth:

> Power corrupts not only the possessor's capacity for loving but the spontaneity of others' love. […] The appetite for flattery grows by what it feeds on; those who refuse to flatter are hated and banished while the flatterers are rewarded. […] When Cordelia refuses to barter her love for material profit, Lear banishes both her and the one man who dares to take her part.[9]

Raiment, that outer symbol of wealth and position, as recognized by the sumptuary laws (Regan's "gorgeousness" standing in clear contrast to Edgar's "loop'd and window'd ragged-ness" (III, 4, 31)), serves as a mask for evil thoughts or doings. "Time shall unfold what plaited cunning hides" (I, 1, 279) says Cordelia to her sisters, anticipating the future and metaphorically echoing her own dismantling "so many folds of favour" (I, 1, 217), while Edgar and Kent each caricature courtiers, equating their vices with their raiment. Kent's portrait of Oswald thus shows him as aping the gentleman "three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy worsted stocking knave" (II, 2, 14-5). Lear himself, by now devastatingly clear-sighted, will tell Gloucester: "Through tatter'd clothes small vices do appear; / Robes and furr'd gowns hide all." (IV, 6, 162-3).

Brought face to face on stage are therefore the victims of dire poverty (in the guise of the archetypal Tom O'Bedlam and of those who have been expelled from the system) and a system corrupted by power and wealth, denounced by its former beneficiaries. If one takes a New Historical perspective, the question is whether Shakespeare, in vividly staging this confrontation between Tom O'Bedlam and his king, is giving "a voice to those elements of society who find themselves disfavoured […], the ones condemned to be marginalized, displaced, subordinated, demonized or criminalized"[10] and in effect challenging E. M. W. Tillyard's later view of a golden "Elizabethan World Picture". And in so doing, is the play "reinforcing the dominant order or interrogating it to the point of subversion?"[11]

To Swinburne, there was no doubt. *King Lear* was "a fiery protest against the social iniquities and legal atrocities of civilized mankind" and "the first great utterance of a cry from the heights and

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[8] Terence Hawkes, *King Lear,* Plymouth, Northcote House Publishers, 1995, p. 44.
[9] Kenneth Muir, Introduction to the *Arden Shakespeare*, *op. cit.*, p. xlvii-xlviii.
[10] Terence Hawkes, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

depths of the human spirit on behalf of the outcasts of the world".[12] Maynard Mack, echoes him: "all those whom the world, cozened by show, duped by appearances, calls nothing, those whom the world denies substance, are invested with substance by Shakespeare".[13] And as Caroline Spurgeon conclusively argues in her imagery analysis of five Shakespearean plays contrasted with plays by his leading contemporaries:

> We see also very markedly his sympathy with the underdog, as nearly half those images [from classes of men and women] are drawn from the poor and the oppressed, from prisoners, idiots, or madmen, from gypsies, beggars, pedlars and slaves. In this respect […] he differs from all the other writers here analyzed.[14]

Nor does Lear, later echoed by the blinded and outcast Gloucester, stop at such aware-ness, denunciation and guilt. Having come to the realization of the poor's plight, both he and Gloucester move speedily from their respective calls for retributive justice to a sweeping, almost Marxist concept of distributive justice, the former exclaiming:

> Take physic, Pomp; […]
> That thou mayst shake the superflux to them [wretches]
> And show the Heavens more just (II, 4, 33-6)

the latter, after giving a purse to the disguised Edgar, echoing him: "So distribution should undo excess / And each man have enough" (IV,1, 69-70). "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need": the anticipation of Marxism may seem striking, though such a radical interpretation has been carefully put in perspective by Judy Kronenfeld's study.[15]

While poverty is depicted as a harsh material condition and castigated as a form of social injustice that festers through the entire social fabric, invalidating even judges' sentences, we can see that, at least as significantly, it functions as a catalyst and a crucible for Lear and Gloucester, enabling them to reach a heightened social sensitivity, as each metaphorically turns into a medieval 'Everyman'.

If one can describe the terrible stripping away of his status, wealth and illusions as a learning process, it is under the spur of discovered poverty that Lear, stepping out of the comfort zone of material ease, courtly flattery and disguises, embarks on his belated apprenticeship as King. Harshly made aware of the realities of his or any kingdom, he comes to understand the ideal duties of a king and leader. "The poor and the oppressed inherit, not the earth's riches but its wisdom" concludes Maynard Mack, further quoting The French Académie: "Poverty 'hath been the onely and principall cause of enriching many with […] the treasures of wisedome and virtue'".[16] While such learning comes too late for Lear to put into practice, Edgar, his younger alter ego, undergoes a similar

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[12] Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Three Plays of Shakespeare*, New York, The Library of Living Thought, Harper, 1909, p. 16 & p. 18.

[13] Maynard Mack, *King Lear in our Time*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1965, p. 130.

[14] Caroline Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery*, Cambridge University Press, 1935, p. 33.

[15] Judy Kronenfeld, "So Distribution Should Undo Excess and Each Man Have Enough": Shakespeare's *King Lear* – Anabaptist Egalitarianism, Anglican Charity, Both, Neither?" *ELH,* vol. 59, n° 4, winter, 1992, p. 755-84.

[16] Maynard Mack, *op. cit.*, p. 130, also quoting from Pierre de La Primaudaye's *Académie française,* published in 1577 and viewed as a possible influence on Shakespeare's works.

education. And one could argue that a feudal world, led by an Edgar made aware of both his own and its flaws, presents a greater chance of fairness.

In validating their reaction to poverty as to a kind of touchstone, in depicting it as a form of maturation on their part, Shakespeare is sending a message to the great and powerful of his time. He is siding with those who believe, biblically, that "the poor ye will always have with ye". While not precisely subversive, he is almost the only playwright at the time to thus (at least in *King Lear*) show the plight of the poor in true terms without using it to comic relief ends.

But Shakespeare has other preoccupations than those of a historian or redresser of social wrongs, and *King Lear* does not stop at staging, denouncing, and attempting to close the chasm between abysmal poverty and gorgeous opulence. What is questioned goes deeper.

Beyond the social injustice of poverty, what is indicted or at the very least sharply questioned from the outset is a deeply ingrained materialistic philosophy which misguidedly assigns a price to everything and value to nothing. *King Lear*'s opening scene firmly anchors the play in misconstrued materialism in at least four different ways: measurement and quantification of the unquantifiable, pricing what can only be prized, seeking to buy intangible absolutes such as love and loyalty, and finally setting up the ultimate materialistic and patently false equation, "nothing will come of nothing" (I, 1, 89).

In his famous opening speech on his "darker purpose" (35), the king concomitantly seeks to measure or quantify the unquantifiable by setting up a verbal "love test" between his daughters, and to put a price on their responses, since this is how they stand to gain their future estates (even if the spectator and those courtiers "in the know" are aware that it is mostly a pretence):

> Tell me, my daughters,--
> […]
> Which of you shall *we say* doth love us *most*?
> *That we* our *largest* bounty may extend
> Where nature doth with merit challenge. (I, 1, 47-52, italics my emphasis)

From the start, he sets the tone by resorting to a language of quantity and comparison ("most") backed by an equivalent prize ("largest bounty") and establishes himself as sole judge of their purely verbal responses, so that their *saying* will be assessed by his own ("shall we say"). This evaluative mode is picked up by Goneril: "I love you *more than*[…], *Dearer than*[…], *Beyond* what be valued rich or rare […], *No less than* […], *As much as*" (54-8, italics my emphasis) and echoed by her sister Regan, who adds the coinage dimension: "I am made of that self-same *metal* as my sister, And *prize* me at her *worth*" (68-9, italics my emphasis).

Terence Hawkes refers to the *OED* as giving two meanings of love, derived from two distinct origins and phonetic histories (lufian and lofian), the first meaning, as in modern times "to feel affection for", the second meaning to praise, and hence "to appraise, estimate or state the price or value of". He cites the dialogue quoted by the *OED* between Pilatus and Judas Iscariot in *The Towneley Mysteries* as evidence of these two contrapuntal meanings used punningly: (Pilatus: "Now Judas, sen he shalbe sold, how lowfes thou hym?", to which Judas responds: 'ffor thretty pennys truly

told").[17] In the same vein, Lear continues to equivocally mingle both meanings throughout the scene (to Burgundy: "When she was *dear* to us, we did hold her so / But now *her price is fallen*", I, 1, 195-6, italics my emphasis), thus further debasing the notion of love, so that one may wonder whether, to parody Regan, he hath ever but slenderly understood its nature. This confusion is echoed by others as well – thus Gloucester: "in the division of the kingdom, it appears not which of the Dukes he *values most*; for *equalities are so weight'd* […]" (4-5, italics my emphasis).

Worse yet, Lear seeks to bribe those who do not deal in such coinage. He coaxingly entreats Cordelia: "what can you say *to draw / A third more opulent* than your sisters?" (I, 1, 84-5 italics my emphasis). And when she refuses to play his game, he resorts to threat: "How, how, Cordelia! Mend your speech a little / *Lest it may mar your fortunes*" (I, 1, 93-4, italics my emphasis). While it may be tempting to read a dose of perverse obstinacy and pride in Cordelia's refusal to humour him and temper her response with indulgence, he has in fact made it impossible for her to do so. What he is asking is not how much she loves him, but rather how much she is willing to *say* she loves him in order to gain material riches. And unbeknownst to him, a further subtext reads: "will you vie with two cheats to ensure that?" Cordelia can no more use her genuine love as a bid for riches than she can measure or fraction it; neither can she sanction her sisters' lies by upping their ante. Not unlike Tom O'Bedlam,[18] she is, as France will correctly perceive, "the thing itself", authenticity in all its forms, her virtues as "unaccommodated" as her speech.

In the same way, Lear will later try to pay Kent for tripping up Oswald's heels, heedless of owing Kent's help to a loyalty that is not up for bid, a fact that does not escape his Fool:

> Now, my friendly knave, I thank thee: there's earnest of thy service.
> *Giving KENT money*
> *Enter Fool*
> Let me hire him too: here's my coxcomb.
> *Offering KENT his cap* (I, 4, 91-3)

And indeed the King's money is of as little and as much value as a coxcomb when it comes to bargaining for loyalty or love. Worse, as Terence Hawkes argues,

> Lear's insistence on putting a price on love has a potential, which, once activated, lifts it out of the merely personal and pathetic, establishing it as a betrayal of a crucial sort whose consequences involve disaster on an incalculable scale.[19]

Finally and most tellingly, Cordelia's resistance to Lear's charade of mercenary love prompts the expression of his reductive materialistic mantra, the famous "Nothing will come of nothing" (I, 1, 89), as if the ample shares given to her sisters had come from their rich speeches. This aphorism

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[17] Terence Hawkes, "Love' in King Lear", *King Lear Casebook Series*, Frank Kermode, ed., London, The Macmillan Press, Ltd, 1969, p. 179-181; originally published in *Review of English Studies*, 1959. For a full development of this linguistic analysis, please refer to his article.

[18] First described by Lear as: "thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art" (III, 4, 100-7).

[19] Terence Hawkes, *King Lear*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

would "have struck original audiences as seriously, even ironically wrong"[20], a recognizable transgression of the "*ex nihilo*" doctrine formulated at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, asserting that God had wrenched this world out of nothing. Rolf Soellner quotes *The Anatomy of Sin*, "When God inspired a soul in Adam, he made a blast not of his own nature, nor the air round about him, but even of nothing"[21] and further remarks: "His "nothing from nothing" axiom denies the existence of a spiritual realm in which the greatest somethings come from nothing".[22] Not only is the aphorism difficult to accept coming from a character cast by his function into a position of moral leadership, but the object to which Lear applies it, namely love or the professions thereof, makes it all the more incongruous. "Lear takes a squarely materialistic attitude in a matter that concerns the most immaterial of substances and its qualities".[23]

Just as in the private sphere, materialism leads him to confuse the essence of love with a quantifiable, coinable attribute, thus seriously impoverishing love, in the political and social realm, he tragically confuses "all" and "whole". For centuries the essence of kingship was to be indivisible, to strive for unity in every possible way. In France, Charles VII, Louis XI and their successors devoted themselves to unifying the realm, geographically, politically, and spiritually (hence the bitterness of subsequent religious wars). In England, in Shakespeare's own lifetime, in contrast with Lear's symbolically breaking his coronet into two parts, Queen Elizabeth's first Acts were those of Supremacy (reinstating the Church of England's independence from Rome and instituting her, as Queen, as Supreme Governor of the Church as well as head of the kingdom) and of Uniformity (establishing the unified form religions should take, including the Book of Common Prayer). A further step in unification occurred when she was succeeded by James 1st, finally joining England and Scotland under one crown. By contrast, Lear's choosing to carve up his kingdom must have struck most spectators as a truly "darker purpose"

> raising specters of division and disorder. […] Lear's project effectively reduces the spiritual unifying dimension of Kingship to a mere land-owner's project for partition: "know that we have divided/in three our kingdom", reducing political unity to disconnected fractions of the whole, the line break at the main verb "divided/in three" mimicking the process by virtually fracturing the structure.[24]

Here again, his materialism is disturbingly reductive and sets the tone for his daughters' following it with terrifying speed and efficiency:

> Lear's tragic flaw is the whole being of Goneril and Regan. […] his essential method of thought is picked up by his daughters and made their way of life. In dividing the land, Lear

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[20] Paul A. Jorgensen, "Much Ado about Nothing", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 5, n° 3 (summer 1954) p. 287-95.

[21] Quoted by Rolf Soellner, *Shakespeare's Patterns of Self-Knowledge,* Ohio State University Press, June 1972, p. 291; source document: *The Anatomy of Sin*, 1603, Part II: "The Genealogy of Virtue", sig. B8v.

[22] Rolf Soellner, *op. cit.*, p. 311.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 291.

[24] Terence Hawkes, *King Lear*, *op. cit.*, p. 3-4.

> introduces a principle which Goneril and Regan carry to a logical extreme; […] What comes to power with them is the spirit of calculation.[25]

While *Cor*-delia inherits the *heart* (cor) hidden behind his bluster, her elder sisters inherit but his espoused philosophy, which they waste no time in turning into a formidable weapon against him. Materialism and unchecked opportunism are their signature and Edmund's. While Lear cannot buy Cordelia, the Fool or Kent, all three ready to forgo riches and follow him into poverty and even death, Edmund coolly bribes his captain, dangling advancement if he will murder Lear and his daughter, to which the Captain swaggeringly replies: "If it be man's work, I'll do it" (V, 3, 40). Goneril uses similar promises to enlist Oswald for dirty jobs (be it taunting insolence to her father, carrying her adulterous love letters to Edmund or attempting to murder the blind and defenseless Gloucester), and Lear's logical pleas to Regan get but short thrift:

> Lear: Thy half o'th'kingdom hast thou not forgot
> Wherein I thee endowed
> Regan: Good Sir, to th'purpose. (II, 4, 178-9)
> Lear: I gave you all
> Regan: And in good time you gave it (II, 4, 248)

As the fool, using the king's own logic, ironically tries to warn him, Lear is but reaping what he has sown:

> Fool: Can you make no use of nothing, Nuncle?
> Lear: Why no, boy, nothing can be made out of nothing
> Fool: Prithee, tell him so much the rent of his land comes to. He will not believe a fool
> (I, 4, 129-32)

The patent falsity of his jarring equation will ultimately be brought home in Act IV. From the daughter who would say nothing for material gain and whom he sent away with "nothing", but a curse in lieu of dowry, will come "everything", namely unconditional love and forgiveness, recognition of his lost identity as King, father, and man, an army to fight for his kingdom, music and doctoring to return him to his senses. Through her unwavering love, he will fleetingly but essentially be made whole and find life sweet anew. In the same way, his one loyal follower, other than the Fool, will be the once cruelly banished Kent.

Before such recognition however, Lear, dimly aware of the puzzling failure of his materialistic stance, retreats from it and appeals to Regan, invoking the very feudal bond he had rejected from Cordelia, before breaking it himself:

> […] thou better knows't
> The offices of nature, bond of childhood
> Effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude (II, 4, 175-7)

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[25] Robert B. Heilman, "The Unity of *King Lear*", *King Lear Casebook Series*, ed. Frank Kermode, *op. cit.*, p. 177-178; originally published in the *Sewanee Review* (1948).

But as he speedily discovers in the humiliating cat-and-mouse bargaining conducted with his daughters about the size of his retinue, many a *quantitative* requirement can only be guaranteed by *qualities* such as gratitude, loyalty, honesty or love, of which the sisters are quite bereft.

Dispassionately, they appraise his need and find it wanting. And just as he is about to submit, the absurdly reductive nature of his belief system never more apparent than when he is ready to go home with Goneril on a purely quantitative basis, they deliver the *coup de grâce*, finally driving him to denounce his prior belief system as he discovers the unquantifiable, indivisible, irreducible nature of need:

> *[To Goneril]* I'll go with thee
> Thy fifty yet doth double five-and-twenty,
> And thou art twice her love.
> *Gon:* Hear me, my Lord
> What need you five-and-twenty, ten, or five […]
> In a house where twice so many
> Have a command to tend you?
> *Reg:* What need one?
> *Lear:* O! reason not the need […] (II, 4, 256-62)

Faced with his daughters stripping him, not yet quite down to poverty, but to poverty in a king's parlance, he not only recants materialism and quantification, but the very rational thinking which has been an implicit tenet of his (as in: "for by the marks of sovereignty, knowledge *and reason*, I should be falsely persuaded I had daughters", I, 4, 229-31). Some things cannot, after all, be neatly "reasoned", as the sisters purport to do with him in their verbal joust. Even though we may find with the latter that "he hath ever but slenderly known himself" (I, 1, 292), or see in him with Wilson Knight "a tremendous soul […] geared to a puerile intellect",[26] Lear believed himself to be rational, the opposite of his sweet Fool, and as he begins to apprehend the hideous mistake in judgment he made, he wails:

> O Lear, Lear, Lear!
> Beat at this gate, that let thy folly in,
> And thy dear judgment out! (I, 4, 268-70).

Certainly Lear has never had reason to believe he was not acting rationally. In fact, driven to madness, he tellingly continues to seek to understand the world around him in terms of rational causality: "First let me talk with this philosopher. 'What is the cause of thunder?'" (III, 4, 143-4) and later, more achingly: "Then let them anatomize Regan. See what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" (III, 6, 74-6).

At that stage, he has not reconciled himself to the fact that all may not be explainable in rational or material terms, that there may be, in Hamlet's words, "more things in Heaven and Earth,

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[26] Wilson Knight, "*King Lear* and the Comedy of the Grotesque", *Shakespeare's Tragedies,* Laurence Lerner, ed., Harmondsworth, Penguin Books Ltd, 1968; originally from *The Wheel of Fire,* 1930.

Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy".[27] The play is, among other things, a reflection on the limits, one could punningly say on the poverty, of rationality, revealed by the interplay between reason and folly or foolishness, between madness, wisdom and vision.

It all begins with Lear's initial "foolishness" or folly, in partitioning his land and banishing Cordelia:

> Lear: Dost thou call me fool, boy?
> Fool: All thy other titles thou hast given away; that thou wast born with.
> Kent: This is not altogether fool, my lord (I, 4, 145-8)

Yet one must distinguish. For all "good" characters in the play seem to behave "foolishly" to the rational Goneril, who answers Albany's upbraiding with a curt: "No more; the text is foolish" (IV, 2, 37) and will dispassionately observe to the dying Edmund: "By th'law of war, thou wast not bound to answer/An unknown opposite" (V, 3, 151-2). Her standard is purely rational and opportunistic, unhampered by moral values. But whereas Edgar, Cordelia and Kent behave "foolishly" in full knowledge and consciousness – "I know you what you are" (I, 1, 268) says Cordelia to her sisters at the start –, acting both from the heart and from a code of conduct, as does the servant who kills Cornwall, the early Lear is an unwitting fool with deficient knowledge of the world, of his daughters' hearts, and of himself, acting out of egotism and self-interest rather than out of true disinterestedness and generosity. As it took the twofold crucible of experienced and encountered poverty to awaken him to a greater self, it will take the crucible of madness to fully enlighten and free him.

Both through Edmund's perfectly sane and rational, but clearly undesirable behaviour, and through the exploration of the power of madness as revelation, Shakespeare relentlessly exposes the poverty and inadequacy of one of man's most cherished tenets or self-delusions, namely reason. In fact, Lear's obsession from the end of Act I to Act III is with losing this precious commodity: "O! let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven" (I, 5, 43), "O fool, I shall go mad" (II, 4, 284), "My wits begin to turn" (III, 2, 67). And yet madness is precisely what is needed for him to escape the limiting prison of the mind unchecked by feeling and values.

As with Gloucester's experienced blindness ("I stumbled when I saw" IV, 1, 19), madness enables him to transcend sight and reason and achieve a seer's searing vision. Only then can he apprehend the true state of his land and his court. Where Cordelia, Kent, and paradoxically the Fool, have no need to go through poverty, neither do they need to experience madness as they know themselves and their code, and are worldly-wise, whereas Lear must not only experience poverty but lose his "mis-prized" mind to achieve insight and wisdom.

The king's inherent greatness surfaces when he is most destitute and bereft. If we revisit the scene in which he comes upon Edgar, we see that it is when his world of certainties collapses about him, that he makes authenticity his quest. At the precise moment when, struck by the plight of the poor, he has fashioned his first attempt at distributive justice, in an ironic re-enactment of an earlier scene with Edmund: ("and pat on 's cue, he comes like the catastrophe", I, 2, 131-2), Edgar's voice is heard from below, unseen as yet, mournfully chanting, as though plumbing the depths of a flood in

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[27] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, eds., London, Thomson Learning, The Arden Shakespeare, 2006, (I, 5, 166-7).

some trial by water: "fathom and a half, fathom and a half! Poor Tom" (III, 4, 36-37). We are still at the precise midpoint of the play's structure, and this is the decisive point of no return for Lear, the encounter between quintessential pauper and king, the moment as of which he will resolutely wade into madness, or as Edgar will later call it: "matter and impertinency mix'd; / Reason in madness" IV, 6, 172-3). In awed terms he asserts:

> Thou wert better in a grave than to answer with thy uncovered body this extremity of the skies. Is man no more than this? […] thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here. (III, 4, 100-7)

This perception will be echoed in the next act by Gloucester: "I' th' last night's storm I such a fellow saw / Which made me think a man a worm" (IV, 1, 32-3). They have both travelled a long way from Lear's proud cry of "Come not between the Dragon and his wrath!" (I, 1, 121).

Edgar is the revelation of naked, unadulterated man, the diametric opposite of the adorned, perfumed, bejeweled courtier. He is the primal creature, owing the animal nothing,[28] and in encountering him, Lear knows he has reached the bottom of the world. Job-like, bent on achieving the essential, he embraces his opposite and strips off those "lendings" with which life, much like the theatre its actors, graces us for our short strut on this stage of fools. "Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head" (Book of Job, 1:20). Ultimate poverty is also nakedness. To be reborn to a new consciousness, Lear must be stripped of all he once possessed, status, belongings, pride, even unto his mind, for Edgar is not only poor, but mad, hence also the diametric opposite of educated, rational man. Only after thus going from "everything" to "nothing", will he achieve the "something" that is our common fate as captured in Edgar's earlier words: "Poor Turlygod! Poor Tom! That's something yet: Edgar I nothing am" (II, 3, 20-21). Like Edgar, Lear is here "recognizing himself as a pastoral 'everyman' […] but it is an index of the kind of pastoral Shakespeare is working towards that this stripped figure should be defined not in terms of his moral purity, but as a forked animal who suffers and has suffered."[29]

He no longer *has*, in the sense of "possesses", anything, but he is beginning to *be* someone. From the highest status in the land, that of a king, he has descended to embrace and take on the lowliest, and in so doing reached the essence of universal man, that of Frateretto. It is a journey from appearances to essentials, from status to identity, once again achieved through the encounter, and at this stage through the adoption, of poverty as his estate. In that sense he is at the opposite end of the spectrum from the wealthy and powerful, who *own* riches but *are* nothing, all status and appearance. Hence the scant mourning they receive: "Officer: 'Edmund is dead, my Lord'. Albany: "That's but a trifle here'" (V, 3, 294).

Poverty is thus immensely (and paradoxically) valuable since it becomes the key to learning, belatedly unlocking new worlds of perception for a deluded king. "Poverty", says the author of *The*

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[28] Lear's description of Edgar has been shown by several critics to closely echo a passage in Florio's translation of Montaigne's *Essays*, one of several in which Montaigne marvels at the insignificance and puniness of man and at his arrogance in believing himself to be so much more than he really is.

[29] Nancy E. Lindheim, "*King Lear* as Pastoral Tragedy", Rosalie L. Colie, F. T. Flahiff, eds., *Some Facets of King Lear: Essays in Prismatic Criticism, op. cit.*, 1974, p. 171.

Praise of Nothing "is necessary for the knowledge of ourselves that are by contrary most insolent and intolerable".[30] Embracing it, Lear travels lighter, letting go of the material and intellectual baggage of his past life. Consider how far he has come in jettisoning clothes for a nakedness that signals the essential man, reason for a madness that brings insight and speaks in the language of revelation, a retinue of sycophants for one of a few "good" fools, judging and retributive anger for identification and distributive justice. From a newly espoused concern for social justice, he has moved swiftly to taking on the poor's very condition and, in so doing, prepares to discover the full richness of feeling.

The experience of poverty and nakedness not only awakens him to a sense of social injustice and drives him to forsake his materialism and rationalism: more essentially it unlocks in him the gift of empathy and caritas.

His tenure as a father or a king revealed mostly egotism and vanity: the stagey partition of his kingdom was primarily designed to minister to his comfort while the love test catered to his vanity. He evinced not the slightest attempt to listen, understand, empathize or forgive, showed no capacity to love, only a desire to be indulged. Crossed, he grew vengeful, and his early trials at first awakened in him only anger, self-pity and a desire for retribution, Indeed the old Lear might well be responsible for Goneril and Regan's "hard hearts". As for Gloucester, both Coleridge and Rosalie Colie perceptively point out what Edmund must have suffered from the casual treatment meted out to him: "To Cordelia and Edgar's disinheritance, Edmund stands as an emblem: we see in Gloucester's carelessness to this child of his flesh a failure in paternity which prepares us for the king's abrupt rejection of his child and for Gloucester's speedy rejection of Edgar later.[31] Such behaviour is mirrored in the court at large, the "good" characters, if one includes Lear and Gloucester, content with "having", the bad ones intent on conquering, only Kent and Cordelia ruled by giving and serving.

Lear's first and formidable challenge is therefore to unlearn "a lifetime of self-conceit and delusion",[32] as well as of egotism. And the gift which poverty and his cruel mistreatment at last grant him goes well beyond his dawning concept of social justice or even his visionary embrace of poor, mad Tom, the quintessential man, as resident sage, guide and philosopher. It comes to him when, abandoning the values of materialism and reason, he enters a world of compassion and pity, of fellow-feeling and brotherhood. In that sense, the name "Frateretto" (frater, brother in Latin) may not be an innocent choice. Beyond the equalization suggested by shaking the superflux to the needy, beyond bonding with the lowliest of the low, much to Gloucester's early chagrin ("What! Hath your Grace no better company?"), countered by Edgar's subtle, value-affirming rebuke as to the bottom of the social scale ("The Prince of Darkness is a gentleman; Modo he's called, and Mahu" III, 4, 140-1), the key to his rebirth and to a new identity as a man is empathy.

Lear cannot see the essential man, without wanting to be one, which is a measure of how deep and rich his emotions flow, once freed. Having previously expressed concern for the "poor naked wretches"(III, 4, 28), he further embraces them by divesting himself of his clothing in the storm, symbolically rejecting any outward mark of superiority, or indeed the protection of any external

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[30] Rolf Soellner, *op. cit.*, p. 312, quoting E. D. [Edward Dyer or Edward Daunce ?] *The Praise of Nothing,* 1585.

[31] Rosalie L. Colie, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

[32] W. F. Blissett, "Recognition in *King Lear*", Rosalie L. Colie, F. T. Flahiff, eds., *Some Facets of King Lear: Essays in Prismatic Criticism, op. cit.*, p. 105.

trappings. The gesture marks a significant step in his education both as a man and as a king. The two quests, self-discovery and discovery of the vaster human predicament, are intimately related, just as Lear's initial question, albeit more fraught with status at the time – "Who is it that can tell me who I am" (I, 4, 227), inevitably led to his subsequent concern: "is man no more than this?" (III, 4, 100-1). And while the first answer was an ominous "Lear's shadow" (I, 4, 228), his journey brings him to the essential Lear.

What defines us? Is it our status? Is our identity the sum of what we possess or control? Poverty teaches him how vulnerable man is to losing all of the above. It teaches him Ecclesiastes's central lesson: *Vanitas vanitatum*. And in so doing, it enables a revelation of the self to the self. Only in adversity and poverty do we find out who we truly are: "there I found 'em, there I smelt 'em out" (IV, 6, 103) he says of his former courtiers and flatterers. But he is only able to do so because, contrary to what the latter sycophantically told him, he knows by then that he is "not ague-proof" (IV, 6, 105).

The revelation of the self is also the revelation of its kinship to others, which only poverty tellingly brings home. Riches not only distort the truth but isolate. Clothes, and those "many folds of favour" (I, 1, 217), protect one from the reality of others. In the Hobbesian world of Goneril, Regan and Edmund, the only human ties are contractual, and not binding at that: "I was contracted to them both" (V, 3, 227) ironically remarks Edmund of the sisters.

By Act IV, having undergone an ordeal by water and fire (the "dreadful pudder" and the thunderbolts in the storm), symbolically divested his former self with his raiment, identified with the poor and the downtrodden and veered into lucid madness, Lear is ready to be reborn. His reunion with Cordelia restores him to his royal status ("How does your Royal Lord? How fares your Majesty?" IV, 7, 44), to his identity as a father, and to his humanity ("*As I am a man*, I think this lady / To be *my child* Cordelia", 69-70, italics my emphasis), as well as to his clothes ("We put fresh garments on him" 22), to his senses (his very statement "I fear I am not in my perfect mind" 63, paradoxically shows him to be lucid) and to happiness. It is a measure of how far he has progressed that he is by then far more interested in the private sphere of father-daughter love than in any resumption of regalia. Poverty has made him quintessentially human, more man than King.

As such, he is now deserving of Cordelia's forgiveness and boundless love and caritas. Her heartfelt "no cause, no cause" (IV, 7, 75) sweeps away the last remnants of the old Lear, fearful of retribution on the part of one whom he treated so poorly. The beauty of the new standard is that it is unaffected by causality. As in the Sonnets, the wealth of love is infinite: "Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds".[33]

In striking contrast to his initial values, Cordelia unhesitatingly returns everything for nothing and we experience with Lear that true wealth lies in giving not having and true poverty less in destitution than in hardness of heart. Lear now experiences the meaning, value and indeed *wealth* of Cordelia's tersely stated bond ("obey you, love you, and most honour you" (I, 1, 97), addressed to him as her King, father and elder), a bond which, as pointed out by several critics, echoes the lifelong

[33] William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 116", Peter Alexander, ed., *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare,* London, Collins, p. 1328, l. 1-2.

strength of the marriage vows: "to love, honor and obey".[34] Her bond and her silence were the richly effective feudal counterpoint to the plethoric quantifying escalation of her sisters' professions of love, so swiftly proven to be but empty rhetoric.

In retrospect, the spectator is brought to realize that the apparent dryness of Cordelia's initial response in the love contest staged by Lear – "I love your Majesty according to my bond, no more no less" (91-2)[35] – was underlaid by unquenchable generosity of feeling. This is also made clear in Act IV when, having received letters about Lear's situation, she struggles with her tears, described as "pearls from diamonds dropp'd" (IV, 3, 23), and "then away she started / To deal with grief alone" (31-2).

This is the essential revelation for Lear, Gloucester and Edgar. In the journey through poverty and madness, whether assumed or real, the measure of all things gradually becomes feeling. Feeling first as a source of lucidity: in Gloucester's words: "I stumbled when I saw" (IV, 1, 19) and later "I see it feelingly" (147), but more importantly, as the key to fellow-feeling: "Let the superfluous and lust-dieted man/[...] *that will not see because he does not feel*", (IV, 1, 66-8, italics my emphasis). This is very much the lesson Saint-Exupery will echo with his famous: "On ne voit bien qu'avec le coeur. L'essentiel est invisible pour les yeux".[36]

Lear's conversion began with compassion for his fool: "how dost, my boy? Art cold? I am cold myself. […] Poor Fool and knave, I have one part in my heart / That's sorry yet for thee" (III, 2, 68-73), to the point of giving the latter precedence into the hovel ("In, boy; go first", III,4,26), after which he extends it to all poor, houseless wretches ("Take physic, Pomp/Expose thyself to *feel* what wretches *feel*," 33-4, italics my emphasis), before his fascinated identification with Poor Tom leads him to put his prescription into immediate and literal practice. Finally, stripped clean of his old value system, he comes to recognize true wealth as that of the heart, hailing Cordelia as "a soul in bliss" IV, 7, 46).

Edgar, more given to stoicism and moralizing, will eventually join Lear in the realm of feeling: "My tears begin to take his part so much, / They mar my counterfeiting" (III 6, 59-60); and when asked who is he by the blind Gloucester, significantly answers as Everyone:

> A most poor man made tame to Fortune's blows,
> Who by the art of *known and feeling sorrows,*
> *Am pregnant to good pity*, (IV, 6, 218-20, italics my emphasis)

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[34] Rosalie L. Colie, "The Energies of Endurance: Biblical Echo in *King Lear*", Rosalie L. Colie, F. T. Flahiff, eds., *Some Facets of King Lear: Essays in Prismatic Criticism*, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

[35] Her "no more, no less" can also be read as implicit reproof of the escalation game in progress, as she parodically echoes her sisters' use of "more than", "no less than" and "as much as". In the same way, she shows herself perfectly capable of entering the quantitative debate, as evidenced by her *reductio ad absurdum* of her sisters' claims: "Why have my sisters husbands, if they say / They love you all?" (I, 1, 98-99), which, as shown by her subsequent behaviour, should not be interpreted as Cordelia's actual belief in such fractioning, but rather as yet another attempt to prove her sisters' falsity, this time *within* the rational and quantitative framework propounded by Lear, probably to save him from a fate she clearly foresees, and therefore out of caring. Indeed, her proficiency in logical argumentation, reminiscent of Portia's in *The Merchant of Venice*, makes her choice of silence all the more compelling, and clears her of the ambiguity of Portia's character.

[36] Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Le Petit Prince*, New-York, Reynal et Hitchcock, 1943.

His[37] sober concluding quatrain stresses feeling again:

> The weight of this sad time we must obey;
> *Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say*
> The oldest hath borne most: we that are young
> Shall never see so much, nor live so long, (V, 3, 322-5, italics my emphasis)

The second line is clearly intended as a reverse echo of the opening command performance in the love test, but can also be heard as an ironic injunction to Edgar himself to feel more and pontificate less.

The focus has thus shifted from a concern with material poverty and injustice to identifying the greater crime, barrenness, or "hardness", of heart. In a sense, it also shifts from the political and social to the personal. True wealth is that of the spirit, as France clearly saw when he seized upon Cordelia as being tragically undervalued when she epitomized the truest values.

Who is rich? Who is poor? What is wealth? What is poverty? For Kenneth Muir, "The symbolic significance of the trial of his two daughters by a mad beggar, a dying Fool, and a serving-man is perfectly clear. *He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and hath exalted the humble and the meek"*[38]. In other words, the poor are putting the mighty on trial, in a spectacular New Testament inspired reversal.

But is this the whole answer? While echoing much of the significance in Lear's journey, the religious overtone of such an interpretation is borne out neither by the depiction of the Gods throughout the play nor by the fate meted out to the "meek". And "mighty", which in the quoted verse clearly designates the temporally rich and powerful, would, in Shakespeare's play, have to be considered in a spiritual rather than in a mere worldly sense, pertaining to the sisters' arrogance of spirit rather than to their status, since neither Cordelia nor France for instance belong to the "humble", but can yet be said to be meek at heart. Among the hierarchy of possible answers, the deepest and richest may well be that given by France at the outset: "Fairest Cordelia, that art *most rich being poor*, / Most choice forsaken, and most loved despised!", (I, 1, 249-50, italics my emphasis), where "rich" refers to values and qualities of the heart. Spectators would have been ready for such paradoxical treatment since they all "educated and uneducated alike, were nourished with the biblical, particularly Pauline, paradoxes of the value of the goods of the faith as compared with the riches of the world, of the blindness of those who think they see and of the foolishness of those that believe they know".[39]

And indeed, the play clearly resonates with an echo of the many biblical quotes (especially New Testament) dealing with the paradox of poverty, as in: "So the last shall be first and the first last" (Matthew 20:16) or "Blessed *be* ye poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God" (Luke 6: 20).[40] But here

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[37] In the Folio version, the one followed in the Arden Shakespeare edition we have been using. In one of the quarto versions, this quatrain is attributed to Albany.

[38] Kenneth Muir, Introduction to the New Arden *King Lear,* p. xliii; the italics are his, the sentence a famous biblical verse from Saint-Luke's in the New Testament, adopted in the *Magnificat* or Song of Mary and found in the Book of Common Prayer, familiar to all of Shakespeare's contemporaries.

[39] Rolf Soellner, *op. cit.*, p. 288.

[40] Quotes are from the online Geneva Bible 1560/1599, http://www.genevabible.org/Geneva.html.

again, one must be cautious, for in the play, the values of the heart, and perhaps to some extent those of an idealized feudal world, have been substituted for "the goods of the faith" of the above quotation, with the Gods consistently appealed to in vain, revealing themselves unjust, and completely, if gradually, vanishing from the stage, as W. R. Elton has compellingly demonstrated in *King Lear and the Gods*.[41]

In the end, Shakespeare seems to propose two dimensions as essential, one more explicit, the other more implicit. In explicit terms, true richness is that of the heart, compounded of both feeling and giving, empathy and caritas, with clear role-models in Cordelia, Kent and the Fool. Seeing the world feelingly should not, however, be mistaken for sentimentality. Further-reaching lucidity than the pragmatism of the evil characters comes with such empathy. Lear's newfound insight thus shows him the grim condition of the social and political world which he led, its rampant injustice and the calamitous power of uncurbed human instincts, one could almost argue of human nature. All are guilty, and it therefore ensues he can condemn none.

More implicit but no less critical is the capacity to learn and grow, which again draws upon listening and empathy. The wicked may flourish for a time, but they neither learn nor grow. Their universe of quantities and rationality is a closed system. Nor do their hubris and "hard hearts" allow them to be permeable or "pregnant" to what goes on around them, whereas Albany, Gloucester, the servant who kills Cornwall, Edgar and Lear all undergo evolution and learning to differing degrees, even if, unlike in many a morality play, such learning and growth mostly remain unsanctioned by worldly rewards.

They learn, not only from their trials, but from one another. Most interesting in that regard is the mirror learning effect between Lear and Edgar, the once and future kings. While his encounter with Edgar, the quintessential man who precipitates him into madness and thence to full insight, is seminal to Lear's growth, Edgar similarly learns from Lear, who with a far greater capacity to feel cosmically, repeatedly stretches the somewhat narrow limits of Edgar's moral universe, enhancing the latter's capacity for pity and challenging his pat moral aphorisms, such as: "The dark and vicious place where thee he got/Cost him his eyes" (V, 3, 171-2). In yet another subtle Shakespearian demonstration of human and inter-generational dependence, the old, deposed king and the young, future king are thus instrumental in each other's learning and progression.

As we saw, contrary to comforting religious aphorisms exalting the meek, Shakespeare posits that such redefined "wealth" may be found in any social rank, the best proof being the existence of a Cordelia, a Kent, or a France. But for those in whom it is not inborn, a state of material poverty, nakedness and adversity offers a compelling crucible. This is in part because poverty and nakedness move us closer to truth (*Nuda Veritas*), in part because, as discussed, the stripping away of our isolating layers makes us more permeable and receptive to the world and to others. So that, in subtle counterpoint to Lear's reductive, divisive approach to his kingdom and to love in Act I, this sloughing off of the superfluous, blinding baggage of the world, of the trappings of material status and existence, enables him to accrue inner and essential wealth of feeling and being. Lear paradoxically engages in renunciation and lightens his load as per his expressed initial intent, but this time it is no travesty, but a true journey towards the essential Lear, in fact to his humanity. In so

[41] William R. Elton, *King Lear and the Gods*, San Marino, CA, The Huntington Library, 1966.

doing, he renounces the delusions of control, status, wealth and mere rationality to espouse the cornerstone values of the bond, fellow-feeling and caritas, emblematized by Cordelia.

And indeed, a surprising paradox of the "child-changed" Lear, paring all down to essentials, rejecting materialism and rationalism in favour of plainer wisdom and feeling, may be that of a powerful patriarch and king reborn through poverty to more traditionally "feminine" values of kindness, feeling and empathy. In this bleak, desolate world and human condition ("is man no more than this?"(III, 4, 100-1) to which we are born, in patriarchal political and social systems more apt to fabricate injustice than justice, which ultimately result in a Cordelia dying hanged like a common criminal, Shakespeare may be telling us that there is something to learn from a different set of values. Speech follows suit and Edgar will close the play on yet another more traditionally "feminine" than "masculine" attribute: "we must speak what we feel, not what we ought to say" (V, 3, 323).

This does not make Shakespeare a feminist. He is not attempting to "liberate" women or change their status. Indeed, feminists may well chafe at Cordelia's self-sacrificing role and at the representation of such "outlaw" female characters as Goneril and Regan. What Shakespeare does seem to be implying is that the world of masculine rule, with its dominant ideology and values, has shown itself to be bankrupt, that reason *alone* will always tend to be on the side of might and even cruelty, (as brilliantly shown centuries later in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*) and at the very least needs an infusion of more traditionally feminine values such as fellow-feeling, pity and caritas, values which can belong to either male or female characters, as do traditional masculine values, to wit Goneril's manliness.

Shakespeare further conveys this message to us in the very way his language espouses the main protagonists' journey. It follows the same route from apparent wealth and bombastic resonance, befitting the celebration of "pomp and circumstance", to plainness and thence to the disconnectedness of madness, all the while counterpointed by its polar opposite, silence. "What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent" (I, 1, 61-2).

Appropriately for a King deluded and trapped by appearances, speech is of paramount importance to Lear. The pageantry of renouncing his kingdom and the request for "spoken" love, which drove him to substitute a contest of eloquence for the "thing itself", set words above their substance. In fact, rather than hear the truth, he sweepingly exiled truth-sayers at court from the land. Lear, self-designated advocate of high speech, delivered majestic, rolling verse and the sisters followed suit. But high speech is easily rhetorical and, like rich garments, can conceal lies and flaws. "Its magniloquence cloaks Lear's self-indulgence, its *copia* the sisters' disloyalty, its nimbleness Gloucester's sin".[42]

Even more critically, as exposed by Cordelia, there is no connection between such flowing words and the world of intent and action: "I want that glib and oily art / To speak and purpose not" (I, 1, 223-4). Such is the lesson of the opening scenes, where all that is said will subsequently be unsaid or disproved.

Just as theatrical illusion is explored in Hamlet, *King Lear* features a prismatic and far-reaching exploration of language as illusion. Words, like other appearances in the play, must be stripped and

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[42] Sheldon Zitner, "*King Lear* and its Language", Rosalie L. Colie, F. T. Flahiff, eds., *Some Facets of King Lear: Essays in Prismatic Criticism, op. cit.*, p. 7.

pared down to achieve authenticity. Yet even the plainest style can be deceptive, as Cornwall points out to Kent. As the king's words break upon the wall of his daughters' wilful deafness, he veers into madness. The ensuing decomposition of language exposes the vanity of reasonable discourse as the language of madness eschews both rationality and communication for revelation. The men resorting to it are outcasts and through their uprooting (assumed or real), they dissolve traditional discourse and replace it with delirium, aphorisms and prophecy. Sentence structure becomes choppy, even, as the play progresses, when desperately reaching for an intensity denied by habitual language, reduced to a single, repeated word as in "kill, kill, kill" (IV, 6, 185), "howl, howl, howl"(V, 3, 256) or "never, never, never, never, never" (V, 3, 307), when it does not further contract to a meaningless yet potently expressive monosyllable: "sa, sa, sa, sa" (IV, 6, 200).

As Lear wrestles with new forms of language, Cordelia all but forgoes speech itself. A. C. Bradley pointed out that she speaks fewer than a hundred lines in the play.[43] For speech participates in the deception of appearances and Cordelia stands for the truth: "So young, my Lord, and true" (I, 1, 106). And truth means that words must correspond to intent and action: "since what I well intend/I'll do't before I speak" (I, 1, 224-25). Indeed, throughout the play, whilst Lear and Gloucester bewail their changed circumstances, Cordelia raises an army, sails to England to rescue her father, remains to do battle when France must away, finds Lear, re-clothes him and restores him to himself, all with the fewest possible words.

As a character, she embodies truth, action, and feeling, all of which are in some way antithetical to words. "The heart of fooles is in their mouth; but the mouth of the wise is in their heart" reads Ecclesiasticus 21: 26[44]. And so Cordelia cannot "heave/My heart into my mouth" (I, 1, 90-1). To Kent's question: "Made she no verbal question?" the Gentleman answers: "Faith, once or twice she heav'd the name of 'father' / Pantingly forth, as if it press'd her heart" (IV, 3, 24-6). True feeling is silent, too heavy for words. Single words, either purposeful and filled with meaning or choked with emotion, are emblematic of Cordelia: "Nothing, my Lord" (I, 1, 86) or "I love your Majesty / According to my bond" (91-2) in the opening scene and later, in their great reunion, appeasing Lear's fears of retribution: "no cause, no cause" (IV, 7, 75) or confirming that she is indeed his child: "And so I am, I am" (70), the repetition alone stressing the intensity of her feeling. Significantly, she cures her father not through words, but through harmony, music, fresh garments and the kiss of love.

Cordelia's silence goes with her feudal values: it is a rock of certainty. The bond *is* all and indeed says it all. The bond and silence were richer answers than Lear could hear at the time. Here again, the message is that less is more, poverty of words richness of intent and feeling. Cordelia, the character poorest in words, is richest of all in feeling, the purest embodiment of essential values. The play's exploration of language mirrors the characters' quest and finds those indulging in opulent prose or poetry at the price of naked truth as wanting as those who pursue wealth or power at the expense of fellow-feeling. Shakespeare vividly exposes language for the tool it can become in skilful hands and all but advocates giving up on it as a reliable medium. Most of his subsequent plays will be comedies indulging in recourse to illusion and magic, thus offering art as an alternative to life, a

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[43] A.C. Bradley, "*King Lear*", Frank Kermode, ed., *King Lear Casebook Series*, *op. cit.*, p.97.

[44] *King James Bible*, Authorized Version, Cambridge edition.

possibility Edgar brilliantly anticipates by creating worlds out of nothing to set the stage for his father's mock suicide. In a brief glimpse of the artist-as-God at work, he skillfully plays with perspective and illusion, impersonating a bewildering variety of roles and conjuring up different universes in rapid succession. Such seems to be the only remaining permissible use of words in their glory, and even then, we are made to feel uneasy as Edgar knowingly deludes his father, albeit with good intent.

Where does this leave us? We have come to know essential man in Tom O'Bedlam as a "poor, bare, fork'd animal" (III, 4, 105-6). We also see in him, or her, the capacity to be "a soul in bliss" (IV, 7, 46), but this "soul in bliss" will be hanged like a common criminal. As Stampfer observes: "*King Lear* is Shakespeare's first tragedy in which the tragic hero dies unreconciled and indifferent to society".[45] The play offers no obvious victory, reward or salvation to any of its characters, nor does it appear to foresee any easy resolution to the problem of material poverty and social injustice. Indeed, while Edgar inherits a throne, how many Bedlamites remain behind, groveling in hovels, thrown upon parish charity?

We have seen that the play touches on the biblical paradox of poverty ("So the last will be first […]) and on Old and New Testament concepts of justice, but its overall message aligns itself squarely neither with the Old nor the New Testament. In fact it is unclear whether it is religious in any formal sense. It clearly rejects Old Testament retributive justice ("an eye for an eye", as is seen by Lear's moving away from this train of thought) although it espouses portions of Ecclesiastes. And looking to the New Testament, although it does propose love and feeling as alternatives to seeking out power or wealth, thus reversing worldly values, it does not seem to promise the poor and the beleaguered a better after-life. There is no mention of another world ("She's gone for ever […] She's dead as earth" V, 3, 258-60), only of the deliverance death represents for Lear – "O! let him pass" (312). Nor does it espouse universal forgiveness and turning of the other cheek. Cordelia is never shown to forgive her sisters, only to embrace her erring father. In fact when we learn of the sisters' death, even the "milk-liver'd" (IV, 2, 50) Albany shrugs it off as immaterial: "Produce the bodies, be they alive or dead; / This judgement of the Heavens […] / Touches us not with pity" (V, 3, 229-31).

Perhaps King Lear's, and therefore Everyman's journey, unrewarded by any material gain, participates most of Keat's "Vale of Soul-Making": "Call the world if you please 'The Vale of Soul-making'. Then you will find out the use of the world").[46] This is not redemption in a Christian or even a religious sense, but when Lear, having forged himself anew, goes from his "wheel of fire" (IV, 7, 47) to the bliss of Cordelia's rediscovered love, and looks forward to prison with equanimity – "We two alone will sing like birds in th' cage" (V, 3, 9), it is clear that he no longer aspires to either retribution or reinstatement, but merely to the fullness of shared love. He has achieved human redemption of a sort. His tragedy, and ours if Lear has become "Everyman", is that it is doomed to be short-lived.

For the world in *King Lear* proves at best a stage of fools: "When we are born, we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools" (IV, 6, 180-1) and at worst, as for Lear, a rack: "he hates

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[45] J. Stampfer, "The Catharsis of *King Lear*", Laurence Lerner, ed., *Shakespeare's Tragedies,* Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1968, p. 156; originally appeared in *Shakespeare Survey*, Cambridge University Press, vol. 13, 1960.

[46] John Keats, "Letter to George and Georgiana Keats", April 21, 1819, Sidney Colvin, *Letters of John Keats to His Family and Friends*, The Gutenberg Project, March 28, 2011, p. 255.

him / That would on the rack of this tough world / Stretch him out longer" (V, 3, 312-4). Worse, there is no other world, so that ranting serves no purpose. "The human condition is as inescapable as it is unendurable".[47] In the end, man's grim lot is as Lear preached: "Thou must be patient" (IV, 6, 176), echoed by Edgar's subsequent: "Men must endure" (V, 2, 9).

But whilst enduring, without promise of reward or justice, we must be responsible. In his fallen state, Edgar had learned that we are neither all nor nothing, but "something". Indeed when he returns to claim his estate, he does so in a very subdued style, revealing himself to his brother merely as "thy father's son" (V, 3, 168): "It is as if Edgar has realized the arbitrariness within the system of social privilege […]. He has *been* Poor Tom long enough to know the pain of dispossession, and in returning as Edgar, he seems vastly more tentative now."[48]

There are values to be lived: feeling, compassion, clear-sightedness, the choice of silence or restraint, duty, and the bond, which must unite all human beings. There is a world to be rebuilt *handy-dandy,* and the play, whilst starkly exposing the frailty of our human condition and our vulnerability, is not a plea for poverty as a state of being, but for the understanding of both physical and spiritual poverty and the desire to progress in dealing with both. Such progress entails greater justice, empathy, the cultivation of one's "feeling" self, as well as full political responsibility. Feudal order or monarchy, if it is to function, requires the highest ethics. It may be better than the incipient commercial age, but only if it espouses feeling and strong values. Edgar, the richer for the "soul-making" undergone in poverty, is the play's best hope as he shoulders the burden of kingship. But the mood of the ending is somber, most akin to that of existentialist humanism, with Edgar cast in the role of a Sisyphus, and the play offers little hope that most men can live these values.

In the end, the true "poverty" Shakespeare may be mourning is the concomitance of a humanity which "must perforce prey upon itself / Like monsters in the deep" (IV, 2, 48-9) and of the dearth of Cordelias, Edgars, Fools and Kents to counteract it. This is the bitterest indictment, and it is scarcely surprising that so many could not face it, allowing Nahum Tate's happy end version, with its unequivocal redemption and restoration of moral and civil order, to grace the stage from the Restoration to the end of the 18th century.

Shakespeare's desolate view of an impoverished humanity will only be echoed quite as bleakly in English literature some three centuries later in *Jude the Obscure*, its eponymous hero wandering a similarly barren heath in increasing poverty until released by, and embracing, death. Interestingly, just as Shakespeare, after *King Lear*, mostly took refuge in the dream world of romances in which a Prospero and an Ariel could tame a Caliban and enforce a happy, ideal society on a secluded island, Hardy, after *Jude the Obscure*, even more radically turned away from novels and "real life" to the distancing of poetry, as if to both writers, the poverty they had laid bare in the human soul and condition had proven overwhelming.

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[47] J. Stampfer, *op. cit.*, p. 156.
[48] William C. Carroll, *op. cit.*, p. 202.