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# Surrender to Pity in *King Lear*

*Garrett Maxwell*

Shakespeare's recasting of *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* into *King Lear* omits a fundamental ordering principle of the original: "providential order and interventionist deity that reinforce a final sense of justice and divine order" (Loewenstein 169). In fact, there is "no sense that providence, even in the guise of pre-Christian gods, has played *any role* whatsoever in the devastating tragedy" (Loewenstein 170). In the absence of the gods, and even the mildest form of natural evil, the agents in the world of *King Lear* and their moral evils are left as the sole objects of scrutiny. However, the model for moral judgment that affirms the direct relationship between moral responsibility and personal autonomy is also nowhere to be found.

The play is fraught with instances of compromised human autonomy which constitutes the main culprit of interpersonal volatility. Lear, for example, is described in both first and third person as a victim of alien forces interfering with his psyche and abusing his nature, while Cornwall relinquishes responsibility to that "wrath which men may blame but not control" (3.7.26-7). The dialectic in the play surrounding autonomy, which

will merit further attention in this study, is remarkably presentient of the quandaries of modern neurobiology that have begun to posit that “our beliefs, moods, desires, motivations . . . are all features of our brains; that these features were caused by prior events over which we have no control” (Sternberg 11). Thus, in this paper, the early modern dialectic of free will and determinism will be posited as coextensive with the modern debates surrounding neurobiological determinism.

If *moral* evil is the only spectacle in *King Lear*, then it risks being collapsed entirely under the weight of this dialectic, reverting back into a world of purely *natural* evil. While my concern will not be whether Shakespeare takes a side in the interminable debate of free will and determinism, which I believe is left intentionally opaque, I see two principal normative symmetries clearly broken in the world of Lear to make space for an alternative worldview. In the first—symmetry between intent and action—the possibility of complete and continuous autonomy is refuted by the apparent dyadic discontinuity. The second—symmetry between action and consequence—is dismantled in the closing scenes when the abused Lear loses everything directly following Edmund’s paradoxically graceful exit.

Contrary to the natural human aversion to the idea of compromised personal autonomy exemplified in Edmund’s famous speech; “We make guilty of our disasters the sun / The moon and the stars as if we were villains on / Necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves / . . . and all that we are evil in by a / divine thrusting on (1.2.120–6), I will argue that *King Lear* refutes the possibility of complete autonomy and instead offers a sublime solution to the problem of navigating a world of fellow fragmented agents that is rooted, not in stoic avoidance of passion and its side effects, but rather in the embrace of a positive form of autonomical surrender—surrender to the power of pity.

Though it suits practical concerns and affirms some of humanity’s deepest desires, complete human autonomy is a myth. Reductionist tendencies champion both ends of the spectrum, from radical freedom to sheer material determinism, but phenomenological data suggests an alternative view. *King Lear* is one such fictive repository of this data. Oxford philosopher A.E. Denham notes that “ordinary human agency is neither seamlessly integrated nor perfectly coherent” (Denham 145) and observes that “human experience is not merely punctuated by episodic interferences from external causal determinants; it is largely shaped by them” (Denham 147). This boundary

between what can be called the 'internal' and 'external' aspects of causal forces is collapsed in *King Lear* in the absence of the divine, yet the 'external' is precisely what Edmund is concerned with in his decrying of "fools by heavenly compulsion." To investigate this matter, it will be necessary to extrapolate the phenomenological data found in the characters' own confessions, because as Sean A. Spence points out, "no account of human action (and therefore human moral responsibility) is ever complete in the absence of a subjective report, a 'view from within,' provided by the agent" (Spence 236). This proves to be a fruitful undertaking in a play bustling with characters quick to chide one another for their opaque actions.

Edmund's decrimal finds its sounding board in the dialogue surrounding Lear when Goneril's response to Lear in Act I Scene iv puts a finger on the pulse: "These dispositions, which of late transport you / From what you rightly are" (1.4.213-4). The infringing force is named as "disposition," a word frequently employed in astrological contexts, linking Goneril's polemic to Edmund's "fool by heavenly compulsion." This compulsion, having thwarted his rightful disposition, assumes an autonomy of its own, allowing for a blame transfer from the transported to the force of transportation. Even Lear himself is convinced, wondering "Why, this is not Lear" (1.4.217). In conversation with Gloucester his growing awareness shows: "We are not ourselves / When nature, being oppressed, commands the mind / To suffer with the body. I'll forbear / And am fallen out with my more headier will" (2.2.296-8). The idea that nature can 'command the mind' and form the duplicity of wills with which he struggles implies a compromised autonomy, in this case, a madness that derails him until it is rectified by his beloved daughter's pity.

However commonplace Edmund's identification of the heavens as the primary mover is, *King Lear* complicates this assumption with a relocation of the causal forces, shrinking the cosmic distance inherent in blaming the heavens to the interior of the human skull. What results from this relocation is a more intrapersonal and psychosomatic rupture than would be possible inside the constraints of the man versus nature trope. A remarkable example with parallels in modern neurological literature is found when Lear gives his 'view from within' in Act II Scene ii: "O how this mother swells up toward my heart / Hysterica passio, down, thou climbing sorrow." A modern Schizophrenic patient in an experiment to produce feedback about the mechanisms of control, commented that "I felt like an automaton, guided by

a female spirit who had entered me" (Spence 232). We are here met with the strange notion that internal forces are somehow experienced as being external: "thy tender-hafted nature shall not give / Thee o'er to harshness" (2.2. 360–61). This phenomenon is loosely termed 'interference.' Spence, in relating modern accounts, describes it as "a sense of separation, alienation, from their most intimate agentic experiences . . . the person is no longer the author of their own thoughts and deeds . . . there is 'interference'" (Spence 228).

The portrayal of interference in *Lear* takes on multiple forms, one being a dual of passions assuming distinct identities and vying for control, as in Gloucester's comment about Lear: "When misery could beguile the tyrant's rage / And frustrate his proud will" (4.6.63–4). Misery must beguile the current steward of Lear, rage, to take over, and Lear is not named amongst those vying for control. These anthropomorphic descriptions are advanced in Act IV when speaking of Cordelia: "It seem'd she was a queen / Over her passion, who, most rebel-like / Sought to be king o'er her" (4.3.13–14). The forces are so distinct that gender is inverted. What the language in these examples makes clear is that the forces at work are distinct from the agent itself, meriting various names taken from the menagerie of passions and even gender assumptions. This phenomenon is framed by Denham thusly: "Even though the efficacious powers lie within our own natures, they are experienced as something visited on us from without, making our own actions rationally opaque—or even not actions at all" (Denham 145). This notion finds vigorous support in the small sample of phenomenological data explored above.

If profession of intent can be seen as a proof of autonomy, then the glass through which we see darkens further. In *King Lear's* view of autonomy, deontological evaluation fails simply because "intention itself is a product of forces that undermine . . . autonomy" (Denham 148). Furthermore, as if Spence had *King Lear* in mind while writing, "just because behaviours may 'appear' purposeful does not mean that they are. Some quite complex behaviours can emerge without their conduit's 'consent'" (Spence 236). The case of Edmund, the apparently radically free agent, provides a rich case study for testing the limits of these ideas. His solicitation to Gloucester in Act I scene ii to "suspend your indignation against my brother till / you can derive from him better testimony of his intent," given the nature of his deceit, takes on a secondary appeal—to the audience, in reference to himself. Sean Benson, citing Hegel and Stanley Cavell, offers that "these characters

are radically and continuously free, operating under their own power, at every moment choosing their destruction" (Benson 321). This stance is lent credibility by Edmund's professions such as, "Let me, if not by birth, have lands by wit / All with me's meet that I can fashion fit" (1.2.181–2). Edmund, out of apparent necessity, can acquire what he wills and exercise his demiurgic powers to shape his presently contracted existential possibilities. By virtue of wit, he attempts to escape being a "fool by heavenly compulsion." What Benson overlooks, in cases other than Edmund's, is the 'view from within.'

If Spence is taken seriously in insisting that "our provisional understanding is always contingent upon what the subject actually 'says' (even if we do not believe them)" (Spence 331), then Benson's claim of intentional self-destruction does not hold water. Though Edmund insists on self-determination, the forged letter scene reveals a self-reflexive sympathy for its dissolution. Gloucester recoils from the forged letter attributed to Edgar: "had he a hand to write this? / A heart and brain to breed it in?" (1.2.56–57). Edmund, responding to the rhetoric of breeding (a separate organism) says, "It is his hand, my lord; but I hope his heart is / not in the contents," (1.2.67–8) in language referring to a disconnect between heart and hand, or in other words, the volitional center and the appendage of activity. This figuratively resembles the very first patient described in neurological literature as having suffered from an 'alien hand' whose words were "those are two very different people, the arm and I" (Spence 209). In his feigned solicitation of Gloucester clemency Edmund appeals to a distinction between heart and hand.

Edgar's later confrontation with his illegitimate brother displays similar rhetoric that compartmentalizes moving parts instead of portraying a simple movement as seamlessly integrated—"This sword, this arm, and my best spirits are bent / To prove upon thy heart, whereto I speak / Thou liest" (5.3.137–9). It is as if the moving parts themselves must first reach a collective democratic agreement before proceeding. *King Lear* is not content with only deconstructing the psychological aspect of agency and intentional continuity; it goes further to scrutinize the mechanisms of physiological follow through and finds them wanting.

Edmund's pledge to 'nature' complicates the picture, presenting a scenario of simultaneous subduction and manifestation of willpower. Denham's assessment of Agamemnon, by way of comparison, identifies this more subtle movement: "He was in a bad spot, to be sure, but in the event he chooses to set his reasoned deliberations aside and resign his agential authority to a less

ambivalent, more resolute motivational system" (Denham 146). Cornwall offers an analysis of Edmund's fictionally contrived Edgar, which can be redirected to Edmund himself: "I now perceive, it was not altogether your / brother's evil disposition made him seek his death; but / a provoking merit, set a-work by a reprobable badness / in himself" (3.5.5–8). At this point, it is anything except the agent's name that functions as the receptacle of blame. 'Evil disposition' and 'reprobable badness' as well as 'provoking merit' are pitted against each other in a contest of 'language of intimations.'

Catherine Martin, in a study entitled "The 'Reason' of Radical Evil: Shakespeare, Milton, and the Ethical Philosophers," identifies the mechanisms at work as "the avoidance of rational negotiation and choice . . . [which] in its monological simplicity seems highly attractive . . . yielding to every suggestion that comes along and to every current of imitation" (Martin 196). This uninterrupted yielding to 'nature' is to yield to the primal suggestion that the one with "more composition and fierce quality" (1.2.12) ought to "top the legitimate" (1.2.21), a play on the fratricidal trope of Cain in Genesis. As moral philosopher Sarah Buss puts it, "a person can have authoritative status with respect to her motives without having any real power over them" (Denham 148). However, this subtle reading of Edmund escapes the general audience, which has implications I will discuss later. Suffice it to say here, Edmund represents the radically free agent whilst the contrarian notion is suspended until its appearance in his dying words.

The contrast between the respective demises of Lear and Edmund, understood in this context, reveals the frustration of expectation that confounds the audience's simplistic model of moral judgment based on the two symmetries mentioned above. Marco de Marinis elaborates on this theatrical strategy, explaining that "in order to attract and direct the spectator's attention, the performance must first manage to surprise or amaze" or in other words "disruptive or manipulative strategies which will unsettle the spectator's expectations . . . in particular, his/her perceptive habits" (Marinis 109). The expectation elicited in the audience is that Lear will be met with more moral leniency, being at least partially excused by his obviously compromised autonomy, whereas Edmund will rightly receive his comeuppance. As Spence argues, "responsibility requires some form of symmetry . . . if behavior emerges unintended . . . then we as a community seem to suspend moral judgment" (223). Cordelia pleads likewise, "O you kind gods! / Cure this great breach in

his abused nature" (4.7.14–15). But the gods, as has been the case throughout, remain silent.

Notably, Lear comes to himself in a rhetorical display of pure, authentic intent upon reunion with Cordelia: "Come let's away to prison" (5.3.8). In this tender moment, the vexing forces are conspicuously absent. Stripped down to bare man, Lear enacts what he really wants—to spend the remainder of his days in bliss born of authentic intent. However, the surprise comes in the form of one of the more tragic stage directions to ever see print, [*Enter LEAR with CORDELIA in his arms*] (5.3). The void gaping between Lear and personal autonomy eventuates in his intimate proximity to its consequences—literally carried in his arms.

Lear's natural frame is put to death by grief, directly following Edmund's renunciation of his pledge to nature as he dies: "I pant for life. Some good I mean to do / despite of mine own nature" (5.3.40–1). His fate is not so gruesome. Derek Cohen describes Edmund's last moments, or 'conversion,' as "grotesque, and its source of violence is a hideous and nihilistic mockery," but in the same breath, "Edmund's conversion can be made to fit the template of a moral structure . . . there is no ignoring his evident last-minute desire to do good in a world he has helped to damage and suddenly wishes to save" (Cohen 385). Furthermore, Edmund dies with the one assurance he lacked in life, observing "yet Edmund was beloved" (5.3.240) while gazing fondly upon the corpses of Regan and Goneril. In the play's microcosm, Edmund receives a graceful exit, frustrating expectations of just retribution, as Cohen points out, "not even punished with knowing that he has saved no one and nothing" (Cohen 377). Antithetical to Lear, his intimate proximity to personal autonomy eventuates in a void gaping between him and the consequences—[*Edmund is carried off*] (5.3).

It may appear, thus far, that I consider *King Lear* to be a deterministic nightmare. However, mitigation of moral evil by means of neurobiological determinism is inadequate because this "information does not necessarily, or entirely, explain 'what has happened,' nor does it assist that much in specifying what should happen next" (Spence 334). Instead, I claim that Shakespeare offers a solution to those willing to accept his refutation of seamless autonomy. The absence of providence and the gods, I argue, is intended to create a vacuum in which another force is proposed in place of justice, the "much more transformative force" of pity (St. Hilaire 492). With an irony easily lost



amidst much more 'negative passions' that are blamed for every evil, this new answer also demonstrates an ability to compromise autonomy.

The aversion to this classically feminine emotion was preached by the early modern Stoic revival, speaking of "a kind of feminine passionate pitie, which proceedeth from too great a tenderness and weakness of the minde," in line with basic stoic principle that "one should be free of compassion and avoid any surrender to deep sympathy" (Aggeler 323). The stoics are adamant that one should not 'surrender' to this pity, again implying a compromise of autonomy in the pitier. Seneca's assertion that "we ought to avoid both pity and cruelty" loses its traction in a play wherein the villains that commit cruelty "maintain a veneer of rationalism that enables them to serve their appetites without any emotional impediments, such as guilt or pity" (Aggeler 325). So, while the anonymous gentleman cries on behalf of the stoics, "Let pity be not believed!" (4.3.30), it appears as the only force for any good.

It is Lear's sudden pity for the pitiful Edgar that prompts Lear's anagnorisis "that prepares him to receive Cordelia's regenerating love and forgiveness" (Aggeler 322). On the macrocosmic scale, Regan's haunting complaint to Oswald about letting Gloucester live, "Where he arrives he moves / All hearts against us" (4.5.11-2) reveals that pity undermines those who direct "their power of empathy toward the 'ruthless displacement and absorption of the other'" (James 372). Here, the pity Gloucester would induce has the power to move 'all hearts,' rhetoric mirroring Cornwall's description of wrath as a force that can carry out its effect unhindered. Edgar, the virtuous survivor, does so "pregnant with good pity" (4.6.218) that enabled him to exorcise his father's demons and allows his heart to "burst smilingly" (5.3.198). Edmund professes pity: "This speech of yours hath mov'd me / And shall perchance do good" (5.3.198-9), and Cordelia's deep pity for Lear allows him a quasi-redemption before his abused frame gives up the ghost. It is only in the relinquishment of complete autonomy that pity induces, that the cycle of violence can be broken. Retribution falters and fails under the aegis of pity.

Even if the fates of Lear and Edmund deny any sense of justice or symmetry, what they do accomplish is a potent solicitation for pity from the audience, as befitting the tragic genre. Ironically, as Heather James points out, "the theater . . . with its passionate speeches and dire spectacles, inspires sympathy to the point of interference with the playgoers' deliberate exercise

of will" (James 363). If it is true that the play presents problems of "power, hierarchy, and social injustice" then it follows that "pity disrupts attempts to critique these forces by troubling the pitier's ability to make moral and ethical judgments" (St. Hilaire 482). This, I argue, is the effect *King Lear* angles for. Of note, is the peculiar language with which this force of pity is portrayed. The description of its effect as "the contagious solicitation of consent that moves from actors to the audience and out to the social world" (St. Hilaire 505), implies an element—contagion—that lies outside of the agent's control, but in this case, is beneficial when embraced by characters within and audience without. The dynamic hinted at within, is extended by way of invitation to those without.

To paraphrase Sean Spence, even if consciousness does not cause action in the short term, its quality certainly affects the course of long-term cycles of acts (Spence 391). If this is the case, then by virtue of our inherently interactive world, conscious awareness of one another is potentially redemptive (Spence 395). Human responsibility for a consciousness augmented by pity is forcibly foregrounded in *King Lear* and points to a more human response to a world of fragmented agents who clearly do not have all of their marbles by recognizing that neither does one's self. When it comes down to it, the inevitable question seems to be not *if* one has been moved, but rather "what hath moved you" (1.4.266). The spectrum of moving forces proposed by *King Lear* is one ranging from pity, to its opposite, cruelty. And its only resolution, I argue, is that to see one another 'feelingly,' even if it means embracing 'being moved,' is better than calling for retributive justice that is inevitably bound up in 'hierarchies of violence,' and denies grace to the other that is much more like one's self than one would like to think.

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