

Interpretation

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Wisdom and Fortune:

The Education of the Prince in Shakespeare's *King Lear*

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In the last scene of *King Lear* the crown, given away by the old monarch at the play's beginning, comes to rest upon Edgar, son of Gloucester.¹ This fact raises a question: Why is the crowning of Edgar the necessary conclusion for the drama as a whole? This question in turn suggests another: What is the relation of the play's plot and subplot to each other? An examination of this second question leads us to the answer to the first and hence to a central meaning of the play, a teaching about the prince.² If the prince is to be good, he must be wise, and at the heart of political wisdom is the understanding of the role of fortune in the affairs of men.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first addresses the question of the relation of the subplot to the plot and the kinds of issues the subplot raises. The second examines the content the subplot gives to each of these issues. The third offers some preliminary observations on the way the subplot illuminates the plot, the story of Lear.

I

There are some fifty or sixty versions of the Lear story prior to Shakespeare, and none of them has anything like this subplot (K. Muir, 1972, p.xxxix, n.2). Shakespeare took it from Sidney's *Arcadia*. The story of Gloucester and his sons parallels Sidney's story of the King of Paphlagonia and his two sons.³ What is there about Shakespeare's intention that calls for this addition? The answer to this question presumably lies in the relation of this story to that of Lear.

The most obvious relation is that of similarity. The story of Lear is that of a king who gives all to two deceitful daughters who subsequently abuse him and disinherits a truthful daughter who comes to his rescue. The story of Gloucester is that of an earl who advances a false son and disinherits a true one and then "sees" the first abuse him and the second come to his rescue. The subplot repeats the plot.

In repeating a story that centers on the issue of filial piety, the subplot heightens the salience of that issue in two ways. The story of Gloucester both

universalizes and makes more concrete the catastrophe of the story of Lear. A. C. Bradley articulates the first idea:

This repetition does not simply double the pain with which the tragedy is witnessed: it startles and terrifies by suggesting that the folly of Lear and the ingratitude of his daughters are no accidents or merely individual aberrations, but that in that dark cold world some fateful malignant influence is abroad. (P. 215. This observation is also made by Schlegel. See K. Muir, 1972, p. lvi.)

Stanley Cavell gives voice to the second: "Gloucester suffers physically what Lear suffers psychically" (p. 278). Some critics, for example Samuel Johnson and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, think the blinding of Gloucester is "too horrid to be endured in dramatic exhibition" (K. Muir, 1984, pp. 2, 9). The defense of this event is that nothing less horrible would do to give physical expression to what Lear suffers spiritually. "The very violence and horror of [it] finds its dramatic justification in the need to match in another sort the catastrophe to Lear" (Granville-Barker, 1:274).

Surely the story of the subplot does repeat that of the plot and has the effects noted. But it does something else, too. It also tells a different story than that of filial piety and thus raises other issues in the story of Lear.

One finds a hint of this different story in the last speech of act 3, scene 6. Here Edgar comments on Lear's plight: "He childed as I fathered" (3.6.108). Insofar as the subplot repeats the plot, Gloucester is Lear's counterpart. Here Shakespeare suggests that Edgar also be seen as Lear's counterpart, preparing the way for the conclusion of the play when Edgar ascends the throne.⁴ But if Lear is the object of injustice at the hands of two of his daughters, he is the author of injustice in relation to a third. In order for Edgar's comparison of himself to Lear to be complete it must include Edmund. Edmund is Edgar's double, and the two together are a foil to Lear. The subplot, then, not only repeats the plot; it also tells a different though complementary story.

The immediate effect of seeing this different relation of stories is to shift the focus from the private realm to the political. Tolstoy called the subplot of *King Lear* a distraction.⁵ He is right, but the distraction is deliberate. As the main plot becomes increasingly private, the subplot highlights political affairs. In Granville-Barker's words, the story of Lear moves to its climax in act 3 "in one great impetus of inspiration" (1.271). At the start of that movement Lear is surrounded by "all the large effects/ That troop with majesty" (1.1.130–31); at its end, he is but a "Poor, infirm, weak, and despis'd old man" (3.2.20). In act 1 he is concerned to prevent "future strife" in his kingdom (1.1.43–44); in act 3 his sole, obsessive concern is "filial ingratitude" (3.4.14).⁶ Where, at the start, Lear is addressed as "Royal majesty" and treats with other sovereigns from a position of power, by act 3 he describes himself as merely the "old kind father" of two ungrateful daughters (3.4.20).

The subplot does indeed distract from this: its movement, in the person of Edmund, is in the opposite direction and just as rapid. In act 1 Edmund's life is entirely private; as a bastard he has no public standing. By act 2 he has tricked Gloucester into denying Edgar ("I never got him." 2.1.77) and making him heir (2.1.83–84). In act 3 he becomes earl in his father's place by betraying to Cornwall Gloucester's sympathy with Lear and possession of information about the landing of foreign forces to aid the old king.

In act 3, then, as Lear descends into madness, the ultimate private state, we see Edmund rise to the status of major public actor. By act 5, Edmund is Duke of Cornwall, so far as Regan's wishes may make him so (5.3.69–79), and a step away from being ruler of the whole kingdom. The Fool comments on these opposite movements. In a speech to Kent he compares "a great wheel [running] down a hill" with "the great one that goes upward" (2.4.69–72). By the former he clearly intends Kent to understand Lear; the audience recognizes Edmund in the latter. And just as holding onto a downhill wheel will break your neck, so standing in the way of one going uphill will crush you. It is Gloucester's misfortune to get hit from both directions.

As the plot recounts the fall of one monarch, the subplot recounts the rise of another. Plot and subplot not only tell the story of a father's folly and his offsprings' piety or lack of it. Rather, both stories deal with political rule. Surely from the first reference to "the division of the kingdom" (1.1.3–4) the play is about "political rule."⁷ But the subplot gives a particular focus to this issue. This is evident when one considers the story of Edgar.

To appreciate what Edgar's story contributes to Shakespeare's meaning, one need only imagine the end of the play without him. The dramatic resolution of the story of Lear as Shakespeare conceived it requires the deaths of Lear and Cordelia, the end of the evil characters and the reunion of the kingdom under a good ruler. The subplot contributes to all three of these events. In its absence the obvious solution, as the ending of the Quarto suggests, is to assign Edgar's role to Albany and Edmund's to Cornwall. Contrary to some of his sources, Shakespeare has made one of the sons-in-law decent and the other a villain. He also introduces talk of strife between the two (2.1.10–11, 3.1.19–21, 3.3.8–9). This seems to point to a climactic fight between them, leaving Cornwall dead and Albany in possession of a reunited kingdom. Prior to this fight and after the defeat of the French, Cornwall would have been assigned the role of ordering the murder of Lear and Cordelia. Finally, to dispose of Goneril and Regan one need only imagine an adulterous relation between Cornwall and Goneril, like that between Goneril and Edmund, and have Goneril kill her sister and then herself just as she does in the play as written.

What is gained by rejecting this solution and adding Edgar and his brother? In particular, what difference does it make to have Edgar king instead of Albany? Four things seem particularly noteworthy.

1. A fifth-act fight between Albany and Cornwall is merely a fight between two conventional claimants to the throne. The fight between Edgar and Edmund, however, is a climactic fight between good and evil, justice and injustice. In act 4 the action of the subplot chiefly concerns Edgar's successful endeavor to prevent his father from taking his own life. Edgar's thought in acting thus is expressed in a single line in this act: "Thy life is a miracle," he tells his father (4.6.55). In this act, second only to act 1 in length, Edmund has but a single line, addressed to Goneril: "Yours in the ranks of death" (4.2.25). In the penultimate act, in preparation for the coming battle between them, Edgar is associated with life and Edmund with death.

2. Edgar has no conventional claim to the throne as does Albany. In act 5, scene 3, Albany asserts his right to rule (5.3.60–62), a right recognized as resting upon his title and his marriage to Lear's elder daughter (62–67). In this context, on behalf of Edmund, a contrary claim is raised: "In his own grace he doth exalt himself" (68). By the same token, Edgar's ascension raises the issue of a nonconventional claim to rule, a claim of "grace" as opposed to blood.

3. Albany is virtuous, but his virtues are those of loyalty and decency only. In act 1, scene 4, he is slow to appreciate the breach Goneril has deliberately made between herself and her father (271–72), is unaware of what has gone on in his own household (293) and in the matter of prudence seems content, despite his serious reservations, to submit his judgment to that of his wife (327). Edgar, on the other hand, in acts 3 and 4, has shown himself possessed of great intellectual virtue, both in his resourcefulness and his wisdom.

4. The last speech of the play refers to what the new ruler has witnessed (5.3.324–25). But it is Edgar, not Albany, who has seen the most. During the whole of acts 3 and 4, Albany remains at home and learns of events only by report (4.2.2–9, 69–97). If the experience of Lear has a critical lesson to convey, then it is Edgar who has the amplest opportunity to learn it. For Edgar sees with his own eyes what Lear has experienced on the heath (3.4.45–181, 3.6.1–99) and on Dover beach (4.6.80–200), and his comments on both occasions show that these scenes have impressed him deeply (3.6. 59–60, 100–107; 4.6.85, 139–40, 172–173).

The subplot, then, raises three specific issues concerning political rule. First, a contest for rule between one who represents death, Edmund, and another who represents life, Edgar, involves a contest between two different understandings of the good and of justice. Second, the claim of each brother to the throne resting not on convention but merit, raises the question of the character proper to a good ruler, with Edmund embodying a bad or tyrannical and Edgar a good or royal character. Third, as the subplot concludes with Edgar's ascension to the throne, it prompts the question of how what has gone before has prepared him for rule. The conclusion of the play is dramatically satisfying because Edgar is fitted to the role by knowledge of justice, character and edu-

cation.⁸ The account of his education for rule raises the question of the meaning of political wisdom. In the next part I will consider the content the subplot gives to each of these issues.

II

The Idea of the Good and the Just

EDMUND. Edmund shows us what he understands by the good and the just in act 1, scene 2. First he shows how he addresses the question: “Thou, nature, art my goddess; to thy law/ My services are bound” (1.2.1–2). Edmund will be guided not by what *appears* to be good and just to any nation but by what *is* good and just by nature. His speech suggests at once what he thinks nature declares to be good: the unlimited and robust satisfaction of appetite. In particular, Edmund focuses upon the two appetites which are strongest and stand for the rest, the desires for sexual gratification and property (1.2.11–16).⁹ In this same scene Edmund speaks of man’s natural inclination or “disposition” as “goatish” (1.2.124–25). Man’s nature is best understood in the light of the beasts. As the good consists of the satisfaction of appetites, then the just is whatever best satisfies this end. A corollary of this idea of justice is the rule of the more powerful.¹⁰ This idea is expressed in the letter Edmund writes but attributes to Edgar: it is foolish to obey those without power (1.2.47–49).

At the end of the scene as at the start Edmund is alone on the stage and expresses his central conviction in bold language: “Let me, if not by birth, have lands by wit:/ All with me’s meet that I can fashion fit” (1.2.180–81). This is what his goddess teaches: “meet” or right is whatever one can “fashion” to serve one’s appetites, and as the stronger may do most in this direction, rule of the stronger is just.

Edmund’s understanding of the law of nature runs counter to a traditional teaching that saw the “meet” as a restraint upon appetite. This idea Edmund expressly rejects as folly. In the same speech in which he defines the “meet” in a nontraditional way he derides Edgar’s “noble” or traditional nature as a “foolish honesty” (1.2.176, 178). In this way Edmund raises the question as to which of these two different understandings of nature is true, which is wisdom and which folly?¹¹

This question runs through the entire play. Shakespeare dramatizes the question by playing on the paradox of giving to the Fool speeches that express traditional wisdom. Thus, for example, the Fool offers a counsel of restraint in one of his songs that speaks directly to Edmund (1.4.122–25).¹² More to the point, however, is the Fool’s advice to Kent to abandon Lear because he, Kent,

will break his neck by his loyalty (2.4.65–72). The Fool proceeds to comment on this advice: “When a wise man gives thee better counsel, give me mine again: I would have none but knaves follow it, since a Fool gives it” (2.4.72–74). In short, such counsel is called wisdom only by “knaves”; a “wise man” knows it to be folly. The same idea is later expressed in an exchange between Albany and Goneril. Albany reproaches his wife for her injustice toward her father:

Goneril: No more; the text is foolish.

Albany: Wisdom and goodness to the vile seem vile;
Filths savour but themselves.(4.2.37–39)

EDGAR. Nowhere does Edgar express the just man’s idea of goodness and justice so boldly as Edmund expresses that of the unjust man. Although Edgar has the most lines in the play after Lear, almost a third of them are in act 3 where, in the disguise of Poor Tom, he pretends to be mad. But just as with Lear in act 4, in Edgar’s speeches one may detect “reason in madness” (4.6.173). In his speeches in act 3, scene 4, Edgar conveys his idea of the good and the just by indicting Edmund’s understanding as madness or folly.

Edgar has thirteen speeches in scene 4, two of which consist of little more than “Tom’s a-cold” (144, 170). In seven of the remaining eleven, Edgar refers to the “fiend” or “the Prince of Darkness.” Edgar is a sane person pretending to be mad who links the fiend with madness; that is, to do as the fiend advises is madness, and the fiend is the personification of opposition to the “meet” as restraint on appetite. The fiend’s crime, by tradition, is rebellion against God. This is exactly Edmund’s crime from the viewpoint of a traditional natural-law teaching: he will not submit to God’s governance of the universe which dictates the “meet” but claims that “meet” is whatever he can fashion to attain what he likes. In short, by his pretense, Edgar indicts Edmund’s teaching about nature as not wisdom but madness.¹³

This indictment is most complete in Edgar’s longest mad speech in scene 4 (83–98). Recall that when Edmund introduces himself, (1.2.1–21), one of the two appetites given prominence is sexual desire. As if in direct reply to his brother, Edgar emphasizes lust unchecked as the way to and very best expression of madness. In this speech he continually comes back to lust as significant of his past life and the cause of his madness. He was proud and vain—and “serv’d the lust . . .” (83–85); he swore oaths and broke them—and “slept in the contriving of lust, . . .” (86–88); he loved wine and dice—and “in woman out-paramour’d the Turk” (88–90); he was false and bloody—and “let silks betray [his] poor heart” (90–94). He concludes this litany of evil doing by warning his auditors to “keep thy foot out of brothels, thy hand out of plackets” (94–95). Thus, in a speech of sixteen lines, describing crimes significant of madness, half are devoted to lust. As sexual appetite is most insistent, so natural to satisfy, so difficult to restrain, it stands for appetite generally. Edgar is

expounding traditional teaching that appetite must be made to conform to what is “meet” and does not dictate it.

In the central part of this speech (91–92) five vices are characterized by different beasts. This depiction of the human being as debased by a life devoted to the unbridled satisfaction of the appetites reads like an account of Edmund’s role in the play and his self-confessed character.¹⁴ Thus, in acts 1 and 2, Edmund is a “fox in stealth” and, in act 5, a “lion in prey.” Of the five animals, the central one is “wolf in greediness” which corresponds to Edmund’s insistence that he must have Edgar’s land (1.2.15–16). I take “hog in sloth” to refer to lust as sloth is the ordinary sin of rakes. Finally, Edmund is a “dog in madness.” The dog may be taken as representing the spirited part (cf. *Republic* 575a–b). What it means to say Edmund is mad in his spiritedness leads to the next issue, that of the character of the ruler.

The Character of the Ruler

THE TYRANNICAL NATURE. In the persons of the two brothers Shakespeare presents a picture of the characters proper to the tyrant and the king. It is Edmund who appears first. Our initial impression of him, in act 1, scene 1, is not unfavorable. We sympathize with his misfortune that he must suffer for his father’s sin. In part our sympathy reflects our democratic sentiments. Why should the accident of birth make a difference in a person’s standing?

Edmund appeals to those democratic sentiments directly in the great speech with which he introduces himself in act 1, scene 2. As Coleridge notes, Edmund introduces the issue of primogeniture (1.2.3–6) as well as illegitimate birth, and opposition to this social rule is a good democratic position. Edmund appeals to us as a rebel against unjust social convention and as we excuse his wrongdoing in light of the wrong done him, we also admire his determination not to suffer being wronged lightly. “Now, gods, stand up for bastards” (1.2.22) is like the appeal to the God of battles to vindicate the natural equality of man against tyrannic convention. We admire Edmund’s spiritedness because we recognize that the resolve to fight for one’s right is essential to either freedom or rule. Moreover, to this spiritedness is joined intellectual virtue. Edmund reveals a mind that is quick, critical and clear. It is characteristic of such a mind that, as Hazlitt says, “One speech of his is worth a million” (K. Muir, 1924, p.14). In Coleridge’s phrase, Edmund is “Endowed by nature with a powerful intellect and a strong energetic will” (*ibid.*, p. 8).

It is in the service of greed and lust that Edmund employs intellect and will. He uses both in acts 2 and 3 to raise himself to the position of Earl of Gloucester. But it is the spirited element that dominates. In act 3, scene 5, Edmund betrays his father’s complicity in the hostile action of a foreign power. A son who knew that his father was so compromised would be torn between private

and public duty. In the scene in which he exposes his father, Edmund expresses such a conflict (3.5.8–9, 11–12, 20–22). But this brief scene makes clear his sorrow is feigned. In lines that alternate with expressions of filial grief are expressions of Edmund's true and fixed concern, the "mighty business in hand" (14–15), the landing of foreign forces on English soil. What rouses his character is the prospect of battle, the desire for victory and the hope by force of arms and resolution to attain still greater heights. Edmund is mad in his spiritedness insofar both as it serves what is lower than itself and in that service exalts in its own power to accomplish whatever it intends.

THE ROYAL NATURE. For a number of reasons, Edgar makes an impression upon many readers as something less than royal. Unlike his brother, in acts 1 and 2 he appears gullible and weak.¹⁵ In act 3 he is reduced to the antics of a madman. Finally, in act 5 some critics think he is unpardonably self-righteous in his relation with his father. In what follows I will take up each of these objections.

Edgar appears in the play, initially, as Edmund's dupe, and for this reason it is difficult to give him much credit for wit. Yet Edgar shows his intellect from the start. Practically his first lines are to express skepticism of belief in astrology (1.2.135–39, 147). Further, if easily practiced on by Edmund's villainy it is because Edgar is not evil; his honesty or nobility makes him "foolish" (cf. *Republic* 409b, 348c).

After he has been outlawed, when Edgar reappears in act 2, scene 3, he does not display a spirited response to his plight. Rather than declare his intention to fight and win back his estate, he offers his back to the blows (2.3.11–12). But Edgar appears quite spirited when in act 5 he confronts Edmund with his treachery, fights and defeats him (5.3.129–40, 149 S.D.). Moreover, insofar as spirit is associated with Edmund, it is associated with villainy. When spiritedness is *dominant*, as it is with Edmund, it is *excessive*. The fact that in the presentation of Edgar spiritedness appears only second suggests not that the quality is lacking to him but that spiritedness is not the highest; it must be subject to something else that is tender and submissive rather than hard and resistant.

In act 3, in the disguise of Poor Tom, Edgar's speeches, as I have already suggested, are far from mad gibberish. Rather, they show Edgar to be both intelligent and compassionate.

Consider act 3, scene 4, where Edgar first appears as Poor Tom (in act 2, scene 3, he is still Edgar assuming the role of Poor Tom). The audience, of course, recognizes him as Gloucester's nobly born son. He is a sane man pretending to be mad to escape detection for fear of his life. In this scene he is disturbed in a hovel where he has taken shelter from the elements by people who know him and thus are likely to see through his disguise. What better way to escape detection than to escape their company? Thus his first speech once he is on stage is "Away," that is, "Go away." He proceeds to give them a sensible

reason to do so, “Through the sharp hawthorn blow the cold winds.” Then, to conclude, he suggests a pleasant alternative: “Go to thy bed and warm thee” (3.4.45–47).

The same calculation explains his next speech. As he pretends to be a beggar, it would be suspicious not to beg, so he asks for a handout: “Who gives anything to Poor Tom? . . . Do Poor Tom some charity” (3.4.50, 59. See MacLean, p.110). But he also does something else to throw them off his scent: he volunteers information to explain any trace of refinement in his appearance that might arouse suspicion. He says once it was his custom to “ride on a bay trotting horse” (55): he has not been destitute from birth. When Lear asks him point blank who he has been, he invents a plausible identity: “a servingman” (84). One thinks of Oswald: not as high in the social hierarchy as a gentleman, but higher than a peasant and so not to be expected to be utterly coarse.

Right after this false identity is offered, Edgar’s father appears. Now the danger of detection is increased: surely his father will recognize him, and his father has ordered his death. Edgar’s speech at this point (112–21), the central speech of scene 4, conveys both his changed relation to his father and his desire for their reconciliation. First he expresses alarm: Gloucester is the “fiend Flibbertigibbet” who “hurts the poor creature.” Then he prays to a famous exorcist, St. Withold, that is, he prays that his father might be cured of the delusion that makes him seek his son’s life. It is not his father who wishes to hurt him but some nightmare that possesses him.¹⁶

Edgar’s next speech after Gloucester arrives is to identify himself again for his father’s benefit. Thus he speaks of how formerly he had “three suits to his back” (132–33), the way Kent describes Oswald (2.2.13–15); explains how he got there: “whipped from tithing to tithing” (131), that is, he has come from some distance; and, finally, declares that he’s been mad seven years (136), as if to say, “I can’t be your son, he hasn’t been gone twenty-four hours yet.”

Like his reaction to his father’s appearance, Edgar’s last speech in scene 4 is a commentary on his situation, this time ironic. Gloucester has come to take Lear to some shelter. Finally, Edgar has every reason to think, he will be left alone. Kent and Gloucester have no wish to take with them a mad beggar. This result is foiled by Lear’s insistence that Tom accompany them. Edgar relieves his mind with an ironic comment significant to the audience but only mad talk to the other characters:

Child Rowland to the dark tower came,
His word was still: Fie, foh, and fum,
I smell the blood of a British man. (179–81)

He admonishes himself to be brave like a candidate for knighthood, for what awaits him will be a trial of courage and of wit; his father’s house is a dangerous or “dark” place to go. He fears his father, as Gloucester is in his present state of mind, as he might fear a man-devouring giant.

In the course of act 3 Edgar also shows himself to be compassionate. In scene 6, in the shelter of one of Gloucester's outbuildings, Lear's madness appears most piteous. Confronted with this spectacle, Edgar tells the audience in an aside, his "tears begin to take [Lear's] part so much/ They mar my counterfeiting" (59–60). His speeches now seem less designed to disguise himself than to humor the king. The best of these is his last mad speech in this scene. Lear's tortured imagination pictures the pet dogs of the court barking at him (61–62). Moved by this, desiring to ease Lear's pain, and aware that he must do so both like a madman and as a madman would appreciate, Edgar throws himself upon the ground and pretends to be a dog loyal to Lear who chases the traitorous court dogs away (63–71).

Let us now address the objections to Edgar based on his relation to his father in act 5. Some see Edgar as self-righteous when he speaks of how Gloucester's sin cost him his eyes (5.3.168–72). But this is like calling Cordelia "untender" or criticizing the Fool for telling harsh truths to Lear—and Lear, when he is sane, tells the Fool he wants only the truth (1.4.176–77). To acknowledge God's rule is to acknowledge the punishment of crime. Judged by our tyrannic desires, there is nothing as cruel as wisdom. But seen with the eyes of justice, there is nothing more beneficial (cf. *Gorgias*, 472e–473d, 480b–481b).

Political Wisdom: the Problem of Fortune

If the play depicts the preparation of Edgar for rule, what does it show him learning? In act 3 it is clear Edgar already knows a great deal, as seen in his reply to Edmund's idea of nature. In particular Edgar knows a great deal about rule. Lear mistakes Poor Tom for a philosopher and asks him what his study is. Edgar gives a mad answer that may be read as prophetic of his actions in acts 4 and 5: "To prevent the fiend and to kill vermin" (3.4.156). In saving his father from self-destruction he "prevents the fiend" and in killing Oswald and Edmund he "kills vermin."¹⁷

This short speech is prophetic also of the play's end in that this "study" may be taken as a statement of what the ruler does. "To prevent the fiend" means that rule should inculcate virtue in the ruled. "To kill vermin" means to punish crime. The object of the ruler is to benefit all his subjects; punishment is to make those who commit the crime better (cf. *Gorgias*, 464b–c).

But though possessed of a good character and a knowledge of justice, Edgar still has something to learn. That lesson concerns fortune. Both Edmund and Edgar express an understanding of what is just by nature. As teachings about natural law, both these understandings have in common the problem of fortune. For law to be natural it must be as strong as nature. Just as you can't "break" the law of gravity, so a truly natural moral law is likewise self-enforcing: you can't get away with breaking it. But, in fact, people do seem to get away with

violations of the natural law. Fortune awards success to those who break nature's law and punishes those who abide by it.

What most shocked eighteenth-century readers of *King Lear* and kept the play as Shakespeare wrote it off the stage for a century and half was the terrible injustice of the death of Cordelia (see Johnson's comment on this in K. Muir, 1984, p.2). Despite her wisdom, fortune, whom the Fool calls "an arrant whore" (2.4.50), decrees her death. When she is led away to what she knows will be her death, Cordelia speaks of "false fortune's frown" (5.3.6). False though fortune may be, Cordelia's compliance with nature's law is powerless to save her.

The problem is just as great for the nontraditional teaching about nature as for the traditional teaching. Thus Edmund must couch his wise schemes in conditional language. What belongs to him by natural right will be his only "if this letter speed,/ And my invention thrive" (1.2.19–20).¹⁸

For the tyrannic man, the solution to the problem is that fortune may be mastered, not completely, perhaps, but sufficiently so as to satisfy an enterprising realist. For Edmund, what most call misfortunes are the result of their own weakness and miscalculations (1.2.115–18). In act 2, scene 1, in a very brief space, Edmund shows us how one masters fortune: be ready to improvise, to use whatever comes to hand (14–15); win the aid of those who can help you by telling them what they want to hear (93–96); speak the language of "duty" though always serving yourself (105). Most important, as Edmund tells the Captain whom he sends to murder Lear and Cordelia, to make one's way "to noble fortunes" one must be "as the time is" (5.3.29–33). To be able to change in this way, what is required, besides intellect, is spiritedness, the boldness that makes a man aware of the possibilities and ready to seize them.¹⁹

Edmund's teaching about nature and her law, that one may do whatever one can get away with in pursuit of the satisfaction of appetites, is not a formula for anarchy because most men realize that they can't get away with much once they set out on a course of harming others. (cf. *Republic*, 358e–359b: Glaucon's account of the origin of justice). Gloucester's servants may decide to abandon a traditional restraint upon their appetites (3.7.96–97), but that decision poses no serious threat; they would soon learn the limits of their possibilities. But it is the seed of tyranny. The real significance of this law is that the clever and bold may give full scope to their ambition. Thus, when Albany rebukes Goneril for her lack of restraint, she perceives him as saying, 'I am too weak and not sufficiently clever to dare to be great; I don't have the courage or ability to master fortune' (4.2.50–55. cf. Nietzsche, *First Essay*, section 13, p. 46). It is because Edmund does that she is drawn to him, and the sexual intrigue of the play dramatizes Machiavelli's metaphor of fortune as a woman who likes to be mastered.²⁰ The man who thinks fortune may be mastered, Edmund, is by his self-description, "rough and lecherous" (1.2.128); the woman who shares his view of nature and fortune is an adulteress and mur-

deress who prefers Edmund's roughness to the more respectful treatment of her husband (4.2.25–28).

The education that Edgar receives teaches him a very different lesson. To be fully fit for rule he must learn that fortune is not ours to master or even to judge, that it is entirely in the hands of God. Edgar learns this in acts 4 and 5.

At the start of act 4 Edgar thinks he understands his fortune and has reconciled himself to it (4.1.1–9). There is a certain amount of self-satisfaction here, that he has escaped from the company of Lear and his father without detection. By the power of his wit he has forced fortune's hand. But it becomes apparent at once that Edgar does not understand his fortune (4.1.25–26). He is learning to reserve judgment; learning that it is not his place to hang on the gifts of fortune.

As act 4 proceeds, Edgar learns, in the case of his father (4.1.19–21), but even more, in the case of Lear on Dover beach (4.6.96–105), that what we take to be good fortune may blind us and thus not be what we take it for. Thus Lear's "good fortune" as king is to be flattered and deceived. Note it is Edgar who hears Lear's newfound wisdom about authority or rule (4.6.148–70) and comments upon it, "O matter and impertinency mix'd" (172). Edgar learns that the good fortune of the usurious judge and the beadle, the fact that their positions make them safe from the sins of, and hence the punishment due to, the thief and the whore, blinds them to the sins they do commit and the fact that not suffering correction for those sins, they are worse off than the thief or the whore who are corrected by their punishment (cf. Luke 18: 9–14). But for the most part thief and whore are not improved by punishment they see administered by hypocrites. The result is that those in authority do not make the ruled better. To rule well one must learn to guard against the blindness toward ourselves and others occasioned by our good fortune. One must learn to be compassionate.

Thus, in act 4, scene 6, after Lear exits, when Gloucester asks Edgar who he is, he responds: "A most poor man, made tame to Fortune's blows;/ Who, by the art of known and feeling sorrows,/ Am pregnant to good pity" (218–20). This speech expresses the two cardinal elements of Edgar's hard-earned political wisdom: the acceptance of what fortune deals us as God's doing and the importance of "good pity."

III

If the purpose of the subplot is to clarify the meaning of the plot, then each of these issues is to be seen as critical for a reading of the story of Lear. The stories of Edmund and Edgar become the lenses through which we view the old king. The tragedy of King Lear then is that to the degree he reflects Edmund in character and in his attempt to master fortune, a good king is guilty of injustice.²¹

The education of Edgar, his preparation for rule, is furnished by the “education” or correction of Lear, the purging of the injustice of which he is guilty.

It is not hard to see that Edmund is a reflection of a part of Lear. Certainly Lear is very spirited. When Goneril demands that her father, having abdicated the throne, give up some of the “large effects” proper to royalty, he responds with fierce curses (1.4.273–87). Granville-Barker comments on this speech: “It is upon this deliberate invocation of ill that we pass into spiritual darkness” (1.288). It may be granted that here and in act 2 Lear’s outburst has been provoked and that he prays for “noble anger” (2.4.274). Still, a competition with Cornwall as to who is the more “fiery” is hardly noble (2.4.88–94, 100–101). Even more excessive are the curses Lear hurls at the world in act 3 when he would see all life destroyed because he has been thwarted in his own desires (3.2.6–9). One might say of all these scenes that Lear’s violence is indicative of his powerlessness, not his spiritedness. But the same cannot be said of act 1, scene 1, when he is still king. When he tells Kent, who would reason with him, not to come “between the dragon and his wrath” (1.1.121), Lear presents an image of spiritedness as evil. The “dragon” will have its way simply because it wishes it.²²

What has aroused that “dragon” is the denial of Lear’s desire. He has asked his daughters to tell him that he is everything. In so doing he has asked for more than is “meet” by the traditional understanding of nature. Goneril and Regan are willing to oblige him; Cordelia is not. Cordelia’s response infuriates Lear because it marks the limit to his desire. The significance of act 1, scene 1, is that it represents a clash between the two ideas of the good and just, the tyrannical and royal.²³

If there is in all of western literature a tragic character of the stature of Lear, it is Oedipus. The two kings have much in common: both are great benefactors of their people; both are spirited; both are compelled to go on a pilgrimage of self-knowledge. Finally, if Gloucester’s blinding is the physical equivalent of Lear’s madness, one may say Lear and Oedipus share the same fate. There is this further parallel: essential to the story of Oedipus is his image of himself as “a child of fortune” (1080), that is, as owing nothing to gods or men, having always made his own way (Sophocles 1:58). There is something of this in Lear also: he too has believed that he was everything (4.6.104–5). His crime, like Oedipus, is to put himself in the place of God (cf. *Republic* 573a, 508a–c).

The parallel between Lear and Edmund is reflected in the fact that the play ends as it begins, with a love test. In act 1 Lear asks his daughters who loves him most, with the implicit promise that on her he will bestow the greatest portion of his kingdom. In act 5 Edmund conducts a love test between Goneril and Regan with himself as the prize (5.1.55–69). In neither case is the test a real one. Each has already decided on a course of action and merely uses the deceitfulness of the two women to attain his ends. Edmund knows he is desired by both women, each of whom has something to offer him. Regan can offer

him Cornwall, which is much; but Goneril, by killing Albany and Regan, can contrive to offer him the whole kingdom, and she appears willing to so prove her "love." Just as in act 1, scene 1, the sisters are avid competitors. The difference is that at the start they paid in words and were rewarded with tangible goods; in the end they pay in deeds and get no reward, or, rather, get the reward they deserve.

The two love tests have an important similarity. Both men ask for something that is contrary to or exceeds what is "meet" by nature. The more obviously criminal claims of Edmund call attention to the wrongness of what Lear is asking. Both think they can make these claims with impunity because they think they can do as they please and by force get away with it. The irony of their situation is no less than that of the two women. Lear "knows" that his daughters are lying when they tell him he is everything to them. Yet he would never have conducted the test in the first place if he had not truly thought that he was everything, that is, could do as he pleased and bring all his intentions to fruition. By the same token, Edmund, who so coolly plays upon the desires of the two sisters ("To both these sisters have I sworn my love;/ . . . Which of them shall I take?/ Both? One? Or neither?" [5.1. 55, 57–58]), wishes to console himself at the end with the thought that he was beloved (5.3.238). He clings in death to what he scorned in life. The grief to which both men come is the fruit of the same seed, a tyrannic character. The story of Edmund highlights the flaw in Lear. The story of Lear is the tale of how the unjust man is made well again by suffering the punishment due to his crimes (see *Gorgias*, 472e).

In Lear's punishment the education of Lear and Edgar meet. Edgar's education comes before his kingship; Lear's comes after. Edgar is taught the value of justice to prepare him for rule; Lear must be taught its value in punishment for the injustice he did in rule, symbolized by his treatment of Cordelia. The spectacle of Lear's punishment is part of Edgar's education. In accompanying Lear on heath and beach, he has journeyed to the underworld. He is like Er who has come back to report on the fate of tyrants, that they are "bound/Upon a wheel of fire" (4.7.46–47).²⁴

Insofar as Gloucester's fate parallels Lear's, Edgar takes this lesson from the spectacle of his father's pilgrimage, too. But here the lesson touches him more closely: when his father suffers, Edgar suffers as well. In experiencing that suffering he learns that it is none of his affair to wait on fortune's smiles or be pleased with the thought of them.

The great lesson of the play as regards wisdom is seen in the response to their fortunes given by the play's two best persons. Fortune only touches external things; what is really important is beyond its reach. Thus Kent in the stocks tells Gloucester not to worry on his account: "A good man's fortune may grow out at heels" (2.2.153). Kent is content so long as he serves "authority" and that "service" remains in his own decision (1.4.22–30). How fortune rewards such service is a secondary matter. The more striking case is that of Cordelia.

Confronted with the prospect of her own unjust death, she says that, for herself at least, she can “outfrown” fortune’s frown (5.3.6. Cf. *Apology*, 30c–d).

This wisdom is summarized best in a short speech of Edgar’s that may be taken to be the best and simplest statement of the play’s lesson: “Men must endure/ Their going hence, even as their coming hither:/ Ripeness is all” (5.2.9–11).²⁵ Fortune is to be left entirely to God: men must endure it (cf. Ecclesiastes, 7: 14–15). It is our responsibility to act rightly, in accord with the “meet.” This is the meaning of “ripeness,” that maturity or perfection or excellence appropriate to the species. When we have acted thus, we have “all,” and fortune, that “arrant whore,” can do us no harm. No prince, whether king or people, will ever rule well until he has learned this lesson.

NOTES

1. The Folio (1623) attributes the last speech of the play accepting the crown to Edgar; the Quarto (1608) attributes it to Albany. There are other differences between Q and F, the most significant being that F contains about 100 lines not in Q, while Q has about 300 lines that have been cut from F, and there are numerous instances in the text where Q and F give different readings. In interpreting *King Lear*, then, one first must decide which text to use, Quarto, Folio or a text that conflates the two. If one chooses a conflated text, one must decide whether to follow Q or F when the two differ. Kenneth Muir reflects the prevailing view among scholars today when he decides for a conflated text with preference given to F in the case of variants (1972, pp. xiv, xvii). My interpretation is based on Muir’s text. Recently some scholars have argued that “Q and F *King Lear* are sufficiently dissimilar that they should not be conflated, but should be treated as two versions of a single play, both having authority” (Warren, p. 97). In this vein Stanley Wells claims that new scholarship has shown that revisions found in F, particularly the omissions of material from Q, are Shakespeare’s and “were not, as has often been supposed, forced upon the author by vulgar theatrical exigencies.” Thus, “future criticism” when not “primarily comparative . . . will have to base itself upon one or the other” (p. 18). In choosing to use a conflated text I rely upon the judgment of Kenneth Muir and David Bevington. Bevington thinks “the case for artistic preference” as opposed to “theatrical exigencies” in revisions of F is uncertain and “overstated” (*King Lear*, ed. Bevington, p. 136). For Muir’s criticism of the argument that F represents deliberate “revision by Shakespeare,” see his “The Texts of *King Lear*: An Interim Assessment of the Controversy,” in K. Muir (1985). My citations throughout are to the Arden Shakespeare edition, which gives all variants and indicates whenever the text is found only in Q or F. In general, my interpretation relies upon F, strengthened by some lines found only in Q. I am not persuaded by Michael Warren that “Q and F reveal significant differences in the roles of Albany and Edgar, differences sufficiently great that one is obliged to interpret their characters differently in each” (p. 99). As I hope to show in this paper, the decisive question is whether to have Edgar at all. Once that is settled, the crown belongs to him.

2. By “prince,” like Machiavelli, I understand the sovereign power. See *The Discourses*, book 1, chap. 58, in which Machiavelli speaks of “cities in which the populace is the prince.”

3. Sir Philip Sidney, *Arcadia*, book 2, chap. 10. Some editions of *King Lear*, for example, the Arden edition and the Bantam Classic edition, include this part of *Arcadia* as an appendix.

4. This line is part of a passage that occurs only in Q. If Michael Warren is right about the differences between Q and F expressing Shakespeare’s deliberate decision to give Edgar a greater importance in F, then one would expect a line comparing Lear and Edgar, the former and the future monarch, in F rather than Q.

5. *Tolstoy on Shakespeare*, p. 63. Samuel Johnson notes that a contemporary critic, Joseph Warton, makes a similar complaint: “the intervention of Edmund destroys the simplicity of the

story." Johnson's defense of "the intervention of Edmund" reflects the interpretation of the critics noted above, that the subplot essentially repeats the plot: Edmund "gives the poet [the opportunity] of combining perfidy with perfidy and connecting the wicked son with the wicked daughters, to impress this important moral, that villainy is never at a stop, . . ." (K. Muir, 1984, p. 2).

6. Shakespeare underscores Lear's obsession by his reaction to "Poor Tom" in this scene: Lear assumes that Tom has been reduced to his condition by ungrateful daughters (3.4.48–49 and 62). See Norman MacLean's account of Lear's madness as a "fixation" upon his daughters, pp. 94–114.

7. Harry Jaffa argues that everything Shakespeare tells us about Lear, combined with what we know about politics, leads us to expect the play to present "the summation of the political art, of political virtue and therewith of political life altogether" (p. 114).

8. In this way *King Lear* dramatizes the argument of the *Republic*. In *King Lear* Shakespeare presents the understanding of the good possessed by, and the character proper to, the perfectly just and the perfectly unjust man respectively and, in depicting his education, vindicates the former. See *Republic*, 360e–362c. F. T. Flahiff argues that the Edgar of *King Lear* is to be seen as the historical King Edgar (reigned 957–975). Flahiff notes that in Tudor and Stuart times the historical King Edgar was "held up as a model for Elizabeth, for James I, and for Charles I" (p. 232). Shakespeare's choice of him as the very type of the just prince, then, is not without precedent.

9. Cf. Machiavelli, who warns the prince, above all, to be wary of thwarting men in these two appetites (*The Prince*, chaps. 17, 19, pp. 66, 72). Aristotle, *Politics*, 1.2, singles out these two appetites as most in need of restraint (1253a35–40).

10. Cf. Machiavelli, *Discourses*, book 1, chap. 6. Machiavelli decides for a democratic as opposed to an oligarchic republic because it is more capable of expansion, in effect because it provides greater means to satisfy the appetites, that is, is more powerful. See also Plato, *Gorgias*, 483–84, 491–92, where Callicles argues that natural law teaches the justice of the rule of the stronger for the gratification of appetite.

11. Edwin Muir argues that in *King Lear* "two ideas of society are directly confronted, and the old generation and the new are set face to face, each assured of its own right to power" (p. 33). These two opposed ideas of society involve different "idea(s) of rulership" (p. 35). Muir sees Edmund as "the mouthpiece of the new generation" (p. 37). This generation "worships nature" because nature "gives them the freedom they hunger for, . . . what they have the power to do they claim the right to do" (pp. 37–38). See also Bauer, pp. 359–66.

12. Kent's response to the Fool's song, 1.4.126, is noteworthy. In espousing the traditional view the Fool says "nothing" that decent men don't already know. Kent is less philosophical than the Fool.

13. Although my interpretation of Edgar differs from his, Maynard Mack also reads the Poor Tom speeches in act 3 as "designed to keep before us the inner metaphysical and moral cost of Appetite" and sees Edmund as the virtual personification of "Appetite" (pp. 61, 60).

14. Edwin Muir also reads this speech as one in which Edgar "giv(es) a portrait of his brother Edmund" (p. 48).

15. Cf. Flahiff: "When he first appears, so much the thing of Edmund, he is a nonentity" (p. 227).

16. When the devil of suspicion has been driven out in act 3 by Edmund's cruel exorcism, a greater fiend, despair, takes its place. Cf. Luke 11:24–26. Edgar then assumes the role of the holy man: when he has cured his father of despair in act 4 he reports seeing a devil depart (4.6.67–72).

17. It is important to note, however, that it is no part of wisdom to mistake the difference between a person, though evil, and "vermin." Edgar is very clear-sighted about Oswald's character, but expresses regret that he must be his "deathsmen" (4.6.249–51, 254–55). Cf. *Gorgias*, 469. Likewise, he exchanges charity with Edmund (5.3.165). This makes a striking contrast with another Shakespearean character intended for the throne, Guiderius, the son of Cymbeline. See *Cymbeline*, 4.2.113–54.

18. Cf. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chap. 7. The problem of fortune is seen in the fact that Cesare Borgia failed in his schemes although "the foundations" he had laid were "so sound" (p. 32).

19. Cf. *The Prince*, chap. 25: "He is prosperous who adapts his mode of proceeding to the

qualities of the times; and similarly, he is unprosperous whose procedure is in disaccord with the times." Above all: "It is better to be impetuous than cautious, for fortune is a woman, and it is necessary, if one wants to hold her down, to beat her and strike her down" (pp. 99, 101). See also chap. 18: a prince must "have a spirit disposed to change as the winds of fortune and variation command him"; in particular, he must know "how to use the beast and the man," know when "to pick the fox and the lion" (pp. 70, 69). Plutarch describes Alcibiades as a "chameleon."

20. *The Prince*, chap. 25, p. 101. The use of this metaphor of aggressive sexual appetite for mastering fortune adds significance to Edgar's emphasis upon "lust" in his depiction of madness.

21. Of course, there is more to Lear than Edmund; Edgar is reflected in him as well. It is noted that Lear is Edgar's godfather (2.1.90). But that we see the way in which Lear reflects Edmund seems critical to understanding the political lesson of the play.

22. Cf. *Republic*, 590b: in condemning as unjust the domination of the spirited part of the soul, Socrates calls it "the lion-like and the snake-like part." I take the "dragon" to be "snake-like."

23. Cordelia has been criticized as imprudent for her truthful reply to her father. See Arthur Eastman's discussion of Georg Gottfried Gervinus in *A Short History of Shakespearean Criticism* (p. 121). In *Pericles*, however, Shakespeare offers what may be taken as approval for Cordelia's response: "For flattery is the bellows blows up sin; . . . Whereas reproof, obedient and in order,/ Fits kings as they are men, for they may err" (1.2.39, 42-43). Surely Cordelia's response is "obedient and in order" and one may well imagine a scene in which a wise king, answered as Cordelia does Lear, would praise her answer and take it as an opportunity to criticize the kind of flattery in which her sisters engage. Jaffa offers a far deeper reading of Cordelia's "imprudence." He sees the clash between Lear and Cordelia in act 1, scene 1, as that between politics and what transcends politics or between justice and an "uncompromising quest for truth" (p. 137). However appropriate or right Cordelia's answer may be in a higher sense, within "the limits of politics" it is imprudent and therefore inappropriate.

24. That Edgar knows of Lear's treatment of Cordelia, thus knows him guilty of injustice, must be assumed. He is a member of a household close to the court, and all the court knew of the deed at once. Moreover, on Edgar's first appearance (1.2.131-47), Edmund is repeating Gloucester's reflections about the influence of the stars, reflections occasioned by Lear's rash action. Edgar does not question Edmund on the occasion of these extravagant notions any more than Edmund needed to question his father. For the myth of Er, see *Republic*, 614b-621b; for the punishment of the tyrant in particular, see 615-616a.

25. See Kenneth Muir's note on this passage in the Arden edition of the play. Jaffa agrees that this passage expresses "the moral of the play" (p. 144, n. 34). See also Mack (p. 117).

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