

MADNESS, MARGINALIZATION, AND THE EPISTEMIC LIMITS OF JUSTICE IN
SHAKESPEARE'S *KING LEAR*

A Thesis

Presented to the Honors Program of
Angelo State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for Highest University Honors
BACHELORS OF ARTS

by

MORGAN JANE PRESTON

MAY 2022

Majors: English and Philosophy

MADNESS, MARGINALIZATION, AND THE EPISTEMIC LIMITS OF JUSTICE IN
SHAKESPEARE'S *KING LEAR*

by
MORGAN JANE PRESTON

APPROVED:

Dr. Erin Ashworth-King

Dr. Allison Dushane

Dr. Susana Badiola

April 29, 2022

APPROVED:

Dr. Shirley Eoff
Honors Program Director

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would not have been able to complete this thesis without my wonderful support system. I want to first thank my research advisor Dr. Ashworth-King for making time for me in her busy schedule. Thank you to Dr. Eoff for her guidance throughout my time in the Honors Program, and thank you to Dr. Dushane for being so encouraging during my first experience with undergraduate research. I consider myself incredibly lucky to have had Dr. Badiola as a professor for nearly all of my semesters at Angelo State University, and I thank her for being so extraordinary even among the fantastic professors that I have had the privilege to learn from at Angelo State. I would also like to thank my volleyball coach, Chuck Waddington, for bringing me to this amazing university and encouraging me to pursue excellence in academics as well as athletics.

I would also like to thank the friends who supported me during late night study sessions while I wrote this thesis. I was grateful to share the experience of writing an honors thesis with Autumn Cleveland, a friend of many years. Even after Sophia Berg and I were no longer teammates, she supported me during my thesis defense, and I am glad that our friendship continues to grow. Although I regret that I met Max Hopf and Price Tarbet too late, I am also so incredibly thankful for the time that we had together; Max is a focused and determined study partner, and the last half of this thesis was written with the energy from countless affogatos that Price made for me.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents. Every day I gain a better understanding of how hard they worked to give me the opportunities that I am so grateful for. Their love and support stretched a thousand miles from our home in Michigan to San Angelo, Texas, and I thank them for teaching me to speak my mind, to love selflessly, and to care for others.

ABSTRACT

Critical interpretations of Shakespeare's *King Lear* have for too long focused narrowly on the experiences and redemption of Lear in isolation from the other characters and the political landscape of the play. I respond to this tradition of reducing the play to the character with whom it shares its namesake by emphasizing where *Lear* and *Lear* diverge. I argue that the play as a whole denounces Lear's attempt to discover knowledge of metaphysical order through isolated introspection, and whereas the popular humanist interpretations of the play celebrate Lear's escape from the political world, I argue that the play itself condemns this selfish choice and demands its audience to pursue justice despite its inevitable difficulties. The main way that the play condemns or condones the actions of its characters, I argue, is the effect that these actions have on the pervasive forces of marginalization within the play. Lear's inability to respond to clear examples of injustice during his isolated epistemic pursuit of an objective basis of justice marginalizes the other characters, and it especially silences his favorite daughter Cordelia. I offer an interpretation of the play that fully recognizes the constant marginalization that Cordelia suffers before she is ultimately silenced in death. By expanding the scope of investigation into *Lear* to include Lear's constant marginalization of Cordelia, I argue against redemptive readings of the play and instead offer an alternative source of optimism through the character Edgar. The play endows Edgar with the moral authority of its final lines because Edgar recognizes the limits of his reason, responds to others' needs, and uplifts the voices of those around him, making him a better source of optimism in the play than Lear.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Outline of Argument	6
Skepticism, Stoical essentialism, and Modern Political Philosophy	8
II. MADNESS	11
Lear Upon the Heath	20
III. JUSTICE	34
The Trial of the Joint Stool	34
Ancient and Modern Political Philosophy	38
IV. MARGINALIZATION	49
V. SILENCE	62
Cordelia's Internalized Silence	65
VI. CONCLUSION	70
WORKS CITED	78

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

In his editor's introduction to *King Lear* in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* (2003), prolific editor and respected Shakespeare scholar David Bevington offers a paradigmatic example of the typical humanist interpretations of the play. He points out that the play has an almost fairytale beginning: once upon a time, a king decided to divide his kingdom among his three daughters in proportion to the love that they express for him; however, the love test goes wrong, and the king banishes the one daughter who truly loves him and divides his kingdom between two daughters who lie about loving him. Bevington points out that "Shakespeare arouses romantic expectation only to crush it by aborting the conventional happy ending, setting up a dramatic tension between an idealized world of make-believe and the actual world of disappointed hopes" (1202). When Lear's favorite daughter, Cordelia, refuses to participate in the fairytale that Lear orchestrates, Bevington claims that Lear does Cordelia a favor in stripping her of her dowry and banishing her from his kingdom: "Lear has bestowed on her an unintended blessing, by exiling her from a worldly prosperity that is inherently pernicious" (1204). According to Bevington, Lear must also be stripped of all his titles and power in order to "learn something precious" (1204), things "he never could know as king about other 'Poor naked wretches' who 'bide the pelting of this pitiless storm'" (1204) unless he feels this misery himself. Bevington reads Lear's abuse at the hands of his two pernicious daughters and his growing madness as "a painful [process], but, since it brings self-discovery, it is not without its compensations" (1203).

Bevington claims that this painful process is necessary to Lear's self-discovery of his human

Publications of the Modern Language Association

nature because “by no other way could Lear have learned what human suffering and need are all about” (1203). In the typical humanist interpretation of the play that Bevington describes, “Enlightenment comes only through suffering” (1204).

Bevington’s reading of *Lear* is a clear example of the traditional redemptive readings that dominate critical interpretations of the play. The redemptive readings emphasize that Lear must lose his power and status in order to undergo a transformation, or, in Bevington’s words, Lear “must lose the world in order to win a better world” (1204). Christian scholars argue that Lear’s great suffering in the play allows him to undergo a spiritual transformation, and humanist scholars emphasize that the same suffering teaches Lear an important lesson about human nature that he could not have known as king. Lear’s redemptive suffering is most clearly articulated by A. C. Bradley in his influential book *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904), in which he praises “the effect of suffering in reviving the greatness and eliciting the sweetness of Lear’s nature” (284). Bradley’s lasting influence on future interpretations of *Lear* was so powerful that one critic published in *The Times Supplement* in May of 1936 recognizes “that in so far as he agrees with Bradley he is mature; and where he disagrees he has still a long road to travel. But he makes no doubt that the road will lead him to Bradley again.” G. K. Hunter gives Bradley, along with other literary giants of the canon like Seneca and T. S. Eliot, his own chapter in his exploration of how Shakespeare is reinterpreted in different traditions in *Dramatic Identities and Cultural Tradition* (1978). While demonstrating Bradley’s incredible influence on the humanist perspective of *Lear*, Hunter also suggests that Bradley intentionally obscures his interpretation’s roots in the now discredited Christian reading of the play: Bradley “is able again and again to suggest the potential of explicit spiritual meaning in the tragic events before us; but is always careful to

withdraw before improper definiteness is required” (284). The proximity between the humanist perspective and the Christian readings in *Lear* suggests that the current predominance of humanist readings did not begin by replacing the Christian readings; rather, humanist readings grew out of Christian readings, reorienting a popular interpretation of *Lear* and borrowing from its influence.

The humanist interpretation of *Lear* has not gone unchallenged, however. Jonathan Dollimore has contributed important work in *Radical Tragedy* (2004) that explains the relationship between the Christian and humanist readings of the play and the obvious pragmatic flaws of this dominant interpretation. He points out that both Christian and the humanist scholars read *Lear* as affirming a stoical essence: suffering creates the opportunity for introspective self-discovery of one’s true nature, though this truth is a transcendental spiritual nature for Christians and a shared human nature for humanists. Dollimore reasonably suggests that the humanists’ emphasis on the “tragic paradox” of humans becoming the most humane at the point of their furthest debasement developed out of the Christian readings of the play (189), but the humanist reading effectively continues the redemptive trajectory of the Christian reading because it “mystifies suffering and invests man with a quasi-transcendent identity” (190). However, an unfortunate consequence of this interpretation is that *Lear* becomes “a world where pity is the prerequisite for compassionate action,” and in this world “where a king has to share the suffering of his subjects in order to ‘care,’ the majority will remain poor, naked and wretched” (191). In contrast to these introspective humanist readings that find some form of redemption through *Lear*’s suffering, Dollimore argues that *Lear* encourages its audience to shift their attention from the individual outward to the power relationships that cause this suffering. The predominant humanist

readings have ignored the play's call for social action both by too narrowly focusing on Lear in isolation from his broader political world and by celebrating his suffering as an essential factor in his internal transformation, as Dollimore claims. I agree with Dollimore's criticism of the humanist readings that focus too narrowly on Lear's spiritual redemption whereas the play itself calls attention to the failing social structures around Lear. However, while demystifying what the Christians read as a play that affirms the existence of an ultimately just moral order and what the humanists read as a play that emphasizes human nature, Dollimore reduces the complexity of the text to a mere criticism of inescapable ideological structures. He suggests that *Lear* is "above all, a play about power, property, and inheritance" (197) in which human virtues like pity and kindness are "precious yet ineffectual" (193). The lack of an *a priori* moral order or metaphysical system does not nullify ethical concerns, and ideological structures are not necessarily subversive to human flourishing. Rather than lamenting the inescapability of social institutions, Shakespeare seems to explore in *Lear* how justice systems ought to be maintained in a world that lacks an intelligible and objective basis of good and evil.

However, contemporary scholars have responded to Dollimore by emphasizing that the play demonstrates redemptive virtues that do offer an escape from the ideological structures that Dollimore reads in *Lear*. In "'Good Pity' in King Lear," Geoffrey Aggeler emphasizes "the redemptive power of good pity" (329), and more recently, Danielle St. Hilaire directly responds to Dollimore by claiming that Lear's madness is caused by his obsession with worldly justice and cured by Cordelia's "radical pity" that "simply abandons justice" (494). However, these more recent redemptive readings abstract from the inevitable challenges of political life that the play does insist are inescapable, although it does not

disparage this fact like Dollimore. The current humanist readings of the play, like their earlier incarnations and their Christian antecedents, also continue to glorify Lear's suffering and explain away the tragedy of Cordelia's death. This same denial led Nahum Tate to rewrite *The History of King Lear* in the Restoration to include a happy ending for Cordelia, a version that dominated productions of *Lear* in English theaters for approximately 150 years. Bradley denounced Tate's rewriting, but he similarly avoids the tragedy of Cordelia's death by describing her as "rather set free from life than deprived of it" because she is "superior to the world" that kills her (324). More current readings like Aggeler and St. Hilaire's now defend the idea that her virtue, though short-lived, has a transformative and redeeming effect on her father.

All of these contemporary humanist readings continue the same sins, myopically lauding the "redemption" of Lear at the expense of the rest of the play text and focusing so narrowly on a character that the play as a whole condemns. From this broader perspective, there is no good evidence that Lear has transformed for the better or learned a lesson from his suffering: he lives in self-deception by believing that he can discover some more natural essence that will make sense of the chaos in his political world, and he dies in self-deception by convincing himself that he sees breath on Cordelia's lips. By trying to find a redeeming aspect in Lear's suffering and Cordelia's death instead of looking at the problems in the society that kills them both, the humanist readings similarly fail to come to terms with the tragedy of this shocking "promised end" (5.3.237). Like Lear, scholars working within the redemptive perspective of *Lear* find the political world too chaotic, and they abandon it to search for human virtues elsewhere. However, *Lear* painfully demands that we acknowledge the necessity of our political world and our terrifying freedom in creating it; in contrast to the

humanist interpretation of the play, *Lear* teaches its audience the danger in assuming the existence of an intelligible and objective principle of justice and that it is irresponsible to abandon the difficult political world.

Outline of Argument

This thesis accounts for the important themes of justice and marginalization in *Lear* that the predominant humanist readings of the play tend to avoid. This research is necessary because the humanist position has serious interpretive and pragmatic problems: it too narrowly focuses on the experiences and questionable redemption of Lear in isolation from the other characters and thus retreats from the political landscape of the play. By mystifying Lear's suffering and celebrating its effects on his supposed transformation, the humanist readings also promote unfortunate pragmatic effects both by celebrating belief in the stoical essentialism that *Lear* as a text warns against and by undercutting the value in suspending judgment that the play teaches. The humanist position thereby misrepresents the play and the philosophical context that informs it by interpreting *Lear* as affirming rather than interrogating stoical essentialism and the process of gaining knowledge through introspection. These critics are right that Lear as a character believes in stoical essentialism, but they neglect *Lear* as a whole, which participates in the contemporary philosophical interrogation of stoicism through skepticism by demonstrating how Lear never achieves this knowledge and goes mad in the process. In this way, *Lear* challenges stoical essentialism through skepticism, and it encourages its audience to seek knowledge by listening to and empowering the voices of others rather than ignoring others in the stoical method of seeking fundamental truths through introspection. The play demonstrates that Lear's belief in stoical

essentialism—in an ordering property that is intelligible to human beings—creates presumption that robs others of the opportunity to speak truthfully. On the other hand, the acceptance of skepticism—the belief that we would not be able to perfectly interpret natural order even if it exists—creates humility that encourages others to speak honestly about their diverse experiences in order to fill the gaps in our limited understanding.

This argument is divided into five chapters surrounding the characters' understanding of their epistemic limits and the effects this belief has on their engagement with the political world and the characters around them: madness, justice, marginalization, and silence. I begin with an analysis of the development of the characters' personal beliefs in the intelligibility of an ordered universe through its relation to madness, especially Lear's madness and Edgar's feigned insanity. In the next chapter, I analyze how Lear and Edgar's beliefs inform their ability to respond to clear injustices in the play; because Lear believes that knowledge of a metaphysical basis of justice is necessary for just political action, he chases this knowledge into madness whereas Edgar is willing to respond to injustice immediately. I then argue in chapter four that Lear's inability to cope with skepticism causes him to silence those who he loves most whereas Edgar's awareness of his epistemic limits motivates him to uplift the voices around him to make up for the fallible and limited human knowledge that he recognizes. My final chapter offers a correction to the myopic humanist readings and explains how this broader scope fully embraces the tragedy of Cordelia's silence throughout the play and her ultimate silence in death. In my conclusion, I explain how the lessons the play teaches translate to the real world; the play's emphasis on the humility that skepticism teaches continues to be important in our democratic society where the majority rules, and it specifically illustrates the importance of our judicial system in counteracting democracy's

tendency to marginalize minority groups by guaranteeing each citizen the ability to defend their individual rights.

Skepticism, Stoical Essentialism, and Modern Political Philosophy

There is good historical evidence that the stoic essentialism that many scholars read in *Lear* was in conversation when Shakespeare was writing. In *Nobler in the Mind: The Stoic-Skeptic Dialectic in English Renaissance Tragedy*, Aggeler explains that the Protestant Reformation and stoic revival share common ground in their belief in a providentially ordered universe, the immortality of the soul, dependence on a deity, and the importance of knowing God by knowing the self through introspection and right reason (21-27). The foundations of the Reformation and stoicism are so similar that Calvinism is sometimes called “baptized Stoicism” (31), and humanist critics are right to see *Lear* as embodying this resurgence of stoical essentialism. However, stoicism was just one of many contributors to the philosophical and cultural landscape during the Elizabethan Era, and *Lear* demonstrates only one of the many philosophical frameworks that are dramatized in the play.

Along with the Protestant Reformation’s particular ties to stoicism, Renaissance humanism was more generally characterized by a return to studying classical works by the ancient Greeks, including but not limited to Plato’s theory of Forms and Aristotle’s four causes.¹ However, during this resurgence of essentialist classical works that emphasize an ordering force in the universe, Niccolò Machiavelli’s revolutionary works were also forming

¹ Renaissance humanism should not be confused with the humanist movement during the Enlightenment that informs the “humanist perspective” that I am attacking. Renaissance humanism involved a resurging interest in Greek texts, but humanism is a human-centered philosophy that includes concerns about human nature and common human experience.

an antiessentialist foundation for modern political philosophy.² Dollimore argues that Renaissance thinkers like Machiavelli, Francis Bacon, and Michel Montaigne popularized the antiessentialist metaphysical theory that denies the existence of an intrinsic or transcendental metaphysical order (160), a trajectory that is later confirmed by Thomas Hobbes' uncompromising empiricism. Though it is generally recognized that stoic essentialism was very much in conversation during Shakespeare's time, it should not be studied in isolation from this diverse and interconnected philosophical thought.

Shakespeare clearly participates in metaphysical questions in other plays, but in *Lear*, he seems to squarely address epistemological questions regarding what we know and how we know it that were also circulating during this time. The rediscovery, translation, and circulation of Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* popularized Pyrrhonian skepticism during the Renaissance, and though there is a difference between doubting the existence of metaphysical order and doubting our epistemic ability to interpret it, these doubts coincided during and leading up to the early modern period. This epistemic doubt is especially clear in Montaigne's *Apology of Raymond Sebond*, in which he argues that human knowledge is no better than that of animals and that humans can have no certainty in knowledge unless they are led by God. Montaigne's larger collection of essays illustrates how this skepticism interacts with the broader resurgence of ancient philosophical thought and modern doubt. The *Essays* begin as a quest for self-discovery of his internal essence: "I write not my gests [i.e. Actions] but my self and my essence" (qtd. in Dollimore 173), but as Dollimore

² Aristotle disagreed with Plato's theory that the physical world is a mere shadow of the more real world of ideas, but through his four causes, Aristotle similarly seeks an ordering force within nature whereas Plato sought an ordering force outside of the natural world. In contrast, Machiavelli studied human history and the brute facts of the political world as it is rather than investigating the more fundamental forms or causes that might underlie it.

explains, “he is prevented from ever finding that self because his own radical scepticism deconstructs the ideological framework on which it depended” (173). For this reason, Montaigne expresses a thorough fideism that denies humanity’s ability to know anything without the help of God in the *Apology for Raymond Sebond*.

Shakespeare certainly read and drew inspiration from Montaigne, but he sets *Lear* in a pagan world where the gods are thoroughly unresponsive to the prayers of the characters.³ By omitting metaphysical evidence in support of the characters’ theism or belief in natural order, the only method Shakespeare allows us for judging the truth value of their beliefs in *Lear* is the pragmatic consequences that their beliefs have on the characters around them rather than its correspondence to a more objective truth. When the characters are considered in context with each other in their political world, Lear’s maddening obsession with objective truth is clearly a callous response to the great suffering that surrounds him, especially because this suffering is partially caused by his fantasy that he ruled as king with an infallible understanding of the objective basis of justice.

³ See *Shakespeare’s Montaigne: The Florio Translation of the Essays, A Selection*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, NYRB Classics, 2014.

CHAPTER II

MADNESS

Lear and Edgar's beliefs must first be differentiated before they can be analyzed for their pragmatic effects on the other characters. However, identifying Lear's beliefs is an interpretive challenge because he descends into irrational madness throughout the play, making his beliefs difficult to discern. Critics disagree about the source, severity, and significance of Lear's madness. Some critics, like Shweta Bali, argue that "Lear's mind begins to fail with age" (89), whereas Jerome Mazzaro claims that Lear's insanity is a consequence of accumulating emotional "shocks" (108) from filial ingratitude. These interpretations attribute Lear's madness to external sources, but Danielle St. Hilaire makes Lear responsible for his madness by arguing that Lear's first moments of clarity in 4.6 correspond to his freedom from his maddening obsession with justice, which St. Hilaire defines as "giving people what they deserve" (488). St. Hilaire thus interrogates Lear's madness by investigating what seems to cure it, and she claims that Cordelia offers Lear this freedom from his insanity by demonstrating "radical pity" (494) as an alternative to justice, allowing Lear to abandon "the logic of justice" (496) that she argues drives him mad.

I agree with St. Hilaire that Lear's momentary sanity in 4.6 indicates that his obsession with giving people what they deserve is a major contributing factor to his madness. However, I offer an alternative explanation to the relationship between justice and Lear's madness that better accounts for the development of Lear's insanity. Lear believes that justice corresponds to metaphysical order, and his madness is caused by his human struggle to understand this objective basis of justice. Lear's madness inevitably intensifies as he investigates this order because this knowledge lies outside of his epistemic reach. His

madness, therefore, is rooted in his refusal to accept the limited and fallible nature of his human reason. However, this is where Lear and *Lear* diverge; his maddening epistemic pursuit of natural order is directly related to his avoidance of skepticism, and the play asserts the importance of recognizing these epistemic limits by punishing Lear's pursuit of objective truth with irrational madness.

A singular cause of Lear's madness during his interactions with his daughters in the first two acts is difficult to isolate, especially because there are diverse signs of Lear's developing insanity throughout the early acts: his emotional rage, his repetitive or blundered language, his rapidly changing judgments, and his later acknowledgment of his impending madness. These signs of madness are all reactions to what Lear views as unnatural filial ingratitude, but this madness is not simply an emotional response from a mistreated father. Lear is no doubt saddened by his daughters' ingratitude, but in the first two acts, he is maddened by what their ingratitude suggests: that he spent his long reign as king arbitrarily wielding power without any natural basis. His daughters' mistreatment forces Lear to realize that he has made a mistake in judgment by dividing his kingdom among unnatural and undeserving children in the love test. This realization causes Lear to consider that he has misunderstood the relationship between the political world and the essential nature that underlies it, an understanding that he believes is essential to his rule as a just king.

During the time that Shakespeare was writing, it was popular to believe that a king's authority is legitimated by his understanding of some ultimate source of objective justice,

whether this be divine or natural. This process is depicted in *Emblemata Horatiana* (1607), attributed to Otto van Veen, which Jane Apetkar argues informed the literary tradition that Shakespeare borrows from. This image depicts a king on earth ruling his kingdom while himself being ruled by Jove above, with Apetkar noting that “the king’s gesture toward his people exactly imitates Jove’s gesture toward the king” (21). The king’s perception of Jove also communicates that



Figure 1. *Potestas potestati subiecta*. From Van Veen's *Emblemata Horatiana* (Antwerp, 1607), p.79.

the king is aware that he is modelling a higher authority rather than manifesting authority through his own person. Lear similarly believes that his power is legitimated not by virtue of his position as king, but by his knowledge of some more fundamental source of justice that legitimizes his power. This is why Lear does not expect to be treated differently when he is without his power; he abdicates his official duties as king, but he believes he still has the good judgment that legitimizes the title of king that he maintains. Lear responds to Goneril’s first sign of filial ingratitude with disbelief, asking her “Are you our daughter?” (1.4.192) before suggesting that she has suddenly become a new person who needs to introduce herself: “Your name, fair gentlewoman?” (205).⁴ Lear is so confident that he will continue to be treated the same after abdicating his throne that he is unable to benefit from the variety of different metaphors that the Fool employs to try to teach Lear that he is fundamentally different without his power; he is “an O without a figure” (166-7) (meaning a zero without a

⁴ Lear’s belief that he will be treated the same after abdicating his power is also communicated by the fact that he continues to refer to the king’s two bodies when speaking about himself.

digit in front of it), “a shelled peascod” (173), and “Lear’s shadow” (204). The Fool even quite frankly states “I am a fool, thou art nothing” (168), but Lear is unable to hear these harsh truths because he is confident that he was respected as king for his knowledge of justice and that he will continue to be respected for this knowledge despite his new powerlessness.

The value that Lear places on his judgment is made especially clear when he is more enraged by Goneril’s suggestion that he lacks this judgment than when she threatens to assert power over him. Goneril first threatens that “the fault / Would not scape censure nor the redresses sleep” (1.4.182-3) if Lear’s “insolent retinue” (175) continues to misbehave within her kingdom, but Lear seems to respond to this threat with shock rather than anger. He responds with questions that indirectly suggest that Goneril’s behavior is inappropriate rather than immediately accusing her of any fault. When Lear is not receptive to Goneril’s first argument, however, she carefully appeals to his good judgment:

I would you would make use of your good wisdom
Whereof I know you are fraught, and put away
These dispositions which of late transport you
From what you rightly are. 1.4.193-6

Lear again indirectly asserts that Goneril does not give him the respect he deserves by asking “Does any here know me?” (199) and “Who is it that can tell me who I am?” (203). This response is more indignant than his initial shock, but these questions are still relatively calm. However, the tone of Lear’s responses changes severely when Goneril adjusts her appeal to suggest that Lear lacks wisdom. She begins by beseeching him “To understand my purposes aright,” suggesting that he has misunderstood thus far, and then clearly states “As you are old

and reverend, should be wise” (207-9). She ends this attack by demanding Lear to “disquantity your train” to “such men as may besort your age, / which know themselves and you” (218-21), again suggesting a generalized lack of good judgment among Lear and his selected retinue. Lear does not tolerate this direct attack on his judgment with indirect questions like before; he instead responds quickly and wrathfully, completing Goneril’s line by saying “Darkness and devils!” (221). This sudden change of tone suggests that his anger is initially sparked by Goneril’s attack on his judgment rather than her abuse of power or filial ingratitude, which are charges that Lear will later accuse her of in his fit of rage.

Lear defends his good judgment from Goneril’s attacks by denying the premise on which she questions his wisdom, stating “Detested kite, thou liest. / My train are men of choice and rarest parts” (1.4.232-3). Importantly, Lear also follows this defense from Goneril with a defense from his own doubt regarding the quality of his judgment. This doubt is created by Lear’s first admission to a mistake in the love test, in which he banished his most loved daughter Cordelia and split his kingdom between Goneril and Regan:

O most small fault,

How ugly didst thou in Cordelia show!

Which, like an engine, wrenched my frame of nature

From the fixed place, drew from my heart all love

And added to the gall. O Lear, Lear, Lear!

Beat at this gate that let thy folly in

And thy dear judgment out. 1.4.236-242

Lear’s attribution of his mistake in the love test to a lack of judgment also suggests that he is specifically concerned about his judgment more than his powerlessness or his daughters’

ingratitude. But although Lear admits an error, he is far from recognizing his limited and fallible judgment in this speech. The impressive number of strategies that Lear employs to avoid this truth indicate that he is actively avoiding the recognition of his epistemic limits. He blames the “small fault” in Cordelia for making itself appear so ugly to him rather than blaming himself for his exaggerated perception of this fault. Lear also assigns agency to this fault and blames it for forcing him to act out of character, reassuring himself that his nature is characteristically “fixed” and not prone to these kinds of errors. Lear is distressed when he finally acknowledges the part that he played in this error, as indicated by the repetition of his name. But even when Lear is the most critical of himself, it is not clear if he is taking responsibility for letting his folly in and his judgment out or if he is blaming his weakening mental faculties for this mistake, a physical “gate” rather than his own free will. Finally, he avoids the possibility of a faulty judgment by blaming his error on a lack of judgment. By setting folly and judgment in opposition to each other, Lear actively avoids the truth that his judgment itself is faulty.

Given Lear’s impressive psychic avoidance of this doubt, it is not surprising that Lear’s first reaction to Goneril’s challenge of his judgment is to flee to Regan’s half of the kingdom. While his horses are being prepared, however, Lear takes the time to explain Goneril’s specific crimes. Lear does not simply accuse her of breaking the contractual terms of the love test by requesting that he reduce his train, and he does not simply accuse her of violating propriety; rather, Lear accuses Goneril of violating a more fundamental natural order. Lear calls her a “Degenerate bastard” (1.4.223) and compares her to a sea-monster, a kite, and a wolf, and he also wishes any child that she might have to “be a thwart disnatured torment” (253) so “that she may feel / How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is / To have a

thankless child” (257-9). Lear is not simply angry that he is being mistreated; he accuses Goneril of thoroughly violating natural order by acting more ruthlessly than a predatory animal.

Despite what Lear believes is shocking and unnatural cruelty from his eldest daughter, Lear maintains confidence that Regan both knows and obeys his view of natural order. Lear is confident that Regan has a “tender-hefted nature” (2.4.160) because she “better know’st / The offices of nature, bond of childhood, / Effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude” along with the “half o’th’ kingdom” (167-9) that he gave her. Lear’s confidence in Regan’s judgment suggests that he views natural order as intelligible and self-evident to all, but when Regan takes Goneril’s side and denies to house him and his train, Lear quickly realizes that the great difference that he sees between his two eldest daughters is illusory. Lear continues to appeal to what he feels he is naturally owed both as father and as former king by telling his daughters “I gave you all” (238), but neither is willing to return a small favor by housing his retinue, indicating to Lear that natural order is not as self-evident as he had hoped. Lear blunders in his response to this unnatural filial ingratitude, a linguistic indication of his unraveling mind:

No, you unnatural hags,
I will have such revenges on you both
That all the world shall—I will do such things,
What they are, yet I know not; but they shall be
The terrors of the earth. 2.4.267-70

As king, Lear wielded language to command his world to fit his judgment of it, but here he linguistically falters when the world that had previously seemed in complete harmony with

his judgment suddenly diverges from him. This blunder specifically occurs when Lear adjusts his plan of revenge to account for the fact that he only has the authority of a subject rather than a king, but after this realization, Lear suddenly admits that he does not know how to respond to his daughters' filial ingratitude. This hesitation suggests that Lear's judgment is not as independently rooted in his understanding of a more fundamental natural order as he had hoped. Lear would like to think that his understanding of natural order legitimizes the power that he wielded as king, but his judgment instead falters when he lacks the power to enforce it. This momentary confusion at the point when Lear realizes that he has the power of one man rather than the power of a king suggests that Lear is grappling with the possibility that his power reinforced his judgment rather than his judgment legitimizing his power. This doubt in the quality of his past judgment is especially potent because he is also being forced to directly confront his current misjudgment of his daughters. Lear might have been able to write off Goneril's shocking ingratitude as a singular unnatural occurrence, but after he clearly misjudges Regan, he realizes that he has misjudged those human relationships that he should know best: as father, he misjudged his daughters' affections, and as king, he mistook his subjects' flattery for honesty. Before escaping to Regan, Lear is confident in ignoring the advice of his Fool, who correctly predicts that Regan and Goneril are as similar "as a crab's like an apple" (1.5.14). Regan's ingratitude forces Lear to admit that he misjudged her, and it demonstrates that his judgment is even worse than that of his court jester.

Along with Lear's struggle with his current and past misjudgments of his subjects, the fact that Lear's understanding of natural order is ineffective against his daughter's arbitrary power also forces him to admit his misjudgment of what he believes is the metaphysical basis of justice. Many scholars note the nearly scholastic rationale that Goneril and Regan employ

to encourage Lear to reduce his attendants, and St. Hilaire even argues that Goneril and Regan's rational cruelty demonstrates the ultimate relativity of worldly justice (491).⁵ However, Lear's constant references to both gods and nature suggest that he seeks to counter their rationality with the certainty of a metaphysical order on which he bases moral judgments. By choosing to describe Goneril and Regan as more like a "boil / A plague-sore, or embossèd carbuncle" (12-3) than sentient and moral beings, he accuses his daughters of what he views as the greater crime of violating an objective natural order rather than focusing on the lower crime of refusing his subjective needs or desires. Though Goneril and Regan's request to reduce his attendants is distinctly rational, he views it as arbitrarily based on their own desires rather than on a reasonable consideration of natural order.⁶ Lear's powerlessness forces him to choose between conceding the ultimate authority of natural order or his understanding of this order, and when faced with this decision, Lear finally accepts that his judgment is flawed. He restates his belief in objective justice and expresses his confusion to the just gods:

You heavens, give me that patience, patience I need.

You see me here, you gods, a poor old man,

As full of grief as age, wretched in both.

If it be you that stirs these daughters' hearts

Against their father, fool me not so much

⁵ St. Hilaire builds off of the argument of Richard Strier, who points out that the "villains" in *Lear* are the greatest proponents for reason (The *Unrepentant Renaissance: From Petrarch to Shakespeare to Milton*, University of Chicago Press, 2011, 48).

⁶ Through his daughters, Lear sees the false conception of justice that Thrasymachus defends in Plato's *Republic*, a justice that is nothing more than the benefit of the stronger or the benefit of the ruling body (338c-339a). Thrasymachus points out the ultimate relativity of justice, but Lear's consistent belief in a natural basis of justice suggests that he is not struggling to accept the truth of relativism; rather, he is struggling with the ineptitude of what he understands as true justice against his daughters' arbitrary power.

To bear it tamely. 2.4.260-5

Lear admits his confusion by referring to the gods with humility rather than certainty.

However, this terrifying recognition is too much for Lear to bear, and it causes him to admit to himself that he “shall go mad” (75).

Lear Upon the Heath

Lear’s interaction with the storm in Act 3 further clarifies that his madness is specifically caused by his concern for his judgment and his aversion to skepticism rather than the emotional shock of filial ingratitude or his powerlessness to take revenge on his daughters. Lear physically evades the terrifying possibility that his judgment has always been at best incomplete and at worst faulty by escaping his kingdom and the filial ingratitude that reminds him of his mistake. In the storm, however, Lear also psychically avoids this fear by attributing his misjudgment to a vulnerability to deception that he has developed only in old age. Lear is clearly bothered by what he views as filial ingratitude by all three of his daughters, but he specifically focuses on the “two pernicious daughters” (22) who he believes tricked him into giving them what they do not deserve. Lear’s frustration with his vulnerability to this deception is especially clear in his jealousy of the “great gods” (49) who have the omniscience to “Find out their enemies now” (51), and he communicates his envy of the gods’ ability to see the “concealed centers” (58) of “Thou perjured and thou simular man of virtue... That under covert and convenient seeming / Hast practiced on man’s life” (54-7).⁷ Lear’s focus on Goneril and Regan’s intentional deception in the love test reframes his

⁷ These lines are from the 1608 Quarto, but the 1623 Folio preserves the meaning: the Folio replaces “concealed centers” with “concealing continents” (58) and also replaces “thou simular man of virtue” with “thou similar of virtue” (54). René Weis, editor of *King Lear: A Parallel Text Edition*, argues that “The difference between the two texts here is one of nuance, but rhetorically F’s version is more powerful” (203).

error from a mistake to a single moment of vulnerability, which allows him to continue evading the terrifying possibility that his judgment has always been incomplete or faulty. In opposition to the gods, Lear describes himself as “A poor, infirm, weak and despised old man” (20). By attributing his vulnerability to old age and deception rather than to his human misjudgment, Lear acknowledges a mistake in the love test while continuing to avoid recognition of his limited and fallible judgment during his reign as king.

Lear avoids the realization that he has always had a fallible and limited judgment, and these methods of psychic avoidance successfully provide Lear temporary relief from his insanity by allowing him to briefly accept his epistemic limits as a necessary consequence of his old age. There are diverse signs of Lear’s madness when he first confronts the storm, but his more temperate choices at the end of the scene seem to support his claim that his “wits begin to turn” (3.2.67) toward sanity. He begins the scene by hyperbolically commanding the storm to “Strike flat the thick rotundity o’ th’ world” (7), and he contradicts himself by first accusing the storm of conspiring with his daughters in “Your high-engendered battles ‘gainst a head / So old and white as this” (23-4) before settling on a view of the storm as an instrument of justice that exposes those with “undivulgèd crimes” (52) by making them tremble in fear of punishment. Lear also addresses the storm as an instrument of justice only ten lines after resolving to “be the pattern of all patience. / I will say nothing” (37-8), rapidly changing between different interpretations and attitudes toward the storm. After delivering many lines filled with kingly authority and contradictory imperative commands, Lear concludes in the less authoritative indicative mood: “I am a man / More sinned against than sinning” (59-60). G. K. Hunter claims that this is another demand for “a fairer distribution of punishment” (253), but these lines might also be interpreted as Lear assuring himself that he

will be safe against the just punishment of the storm. Lear views the storm as perfectly administering justice according to natural law, and when he once again sees just order in the natural world, he stops raging against it and instead resigns to it. Kent cannot even draw Lear's rage out and put it to good use in order to force the "scanted courtesy" (3.2.67) of a house that denied them shelter. Lear's madness subsides while he views the storm as just because he admits that he does not have epistemic access to the justice that the gods know and that the storm administers automatically. This brief acknowledgement of his epistemic limit offers Lear some peace, and ever so briefly, he shows kindness and attention to his Fool, asking him questions to learn about the "concealed centers" (58) that he finally realizes that he cannot have automatic access to: "My wits begin to turn... How dost, my boy? Art cold?" (67-8).

However, the peace that Lear experiences from his confidence in the storm as a natural agent of justice is short-lived. His confidence in the justice of its moral punishment wanes when Lear realizes how severely the storm affects his poorest subjects without touching his unkind daughters who are safe in the kingdom. Lear clings to his conception of the storm as a just arbiter, expressing gratitude that "This tempest will not give me leave to ponder / On things would hurt me more" (3.4.24-5). However, he later admits to the audience in soliloquy that he acknowledges that the storm unjustly falls on the most vulnerable subjects in his kingdom:

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you

From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
Too little care of this. Take physic, pomp,
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
And show the heavens more just. 3.4.28-36

Leon Harold Craig (2001) claims that this speech is when Lear identifies the “pitiless storm” as morally neutral, causing him to realize that “if there is any divine will at work behind these events, it nonetheless requires the active mediation of human intelligence and humane feeling to effect a more just world” (178). However, Lear does not immediately seek to remedy the injustice that he now sees the storm creating. Rather, he sees his destitute situation as an opportunity to learn, to “Take physic, pomp” so that he can “show the heavens more just” (3.4.34-6). In this “Poor naked wretches” speech, Lear identifies a more substantiated mistake than his brief vulnerability to deception in the love test, and he dramatizes himself as the storm’s student rather than its arbiter. While humanists tend to celebrate this speech for Lear’s desire to share experience with the most destitute subjects in his kingdom, Lear does not believe that exposing himself “to feel what wretches feel” is what will make him “show more just.”⁸ There is an important line between this intermediary premise and conclusion; exposing himself to suffering is only a strategy that allows him to “shake the superflux,” which is the final step in his goal to become more just. In other words,

⁸ Jonas Barish and Marshall Waingrow argue that “Lear and his ragged band of supporters on the heath display an impressive solidarity” whereas the rest of the political world falls into division and conflict (354). Lear’s madness and the destitute state of his followers become a happy price to pay for solidarity: “Adversity, having winnowed the true followers from the false, now draws the true followers together in a communion so close that all become ‘mates’ and ‘fellows’ regardless of social degree” (354).

Lear's main goal in exposing himself to feel what wretches feel is to be purified of the superfluous excess of the political world rather than to experience common human suffering.

Lear's "Poor naked wretches" speech is the first clear sign of Lear recognizing the distance between the artificial human constructions in his political world and his essentialist view of nature. Craig explains that philosophy "begins with the 'discovery' of Nature" (168) in contradistinction from the supernatural and the manmade, and he states that the "search for an altogether adequate idea of Nature is practically identical with philosophy" (156). As Lear begins to differentiate between the natural and the manmade, it is not surprising that he also subordinates what is artificial to the more natural order that he believes underlies the political world. Lear's growing awareness of the division between what is natural and what is merely artificial or conventional is later made clear in this same scene when he ignores an offer to be brought "where both fire and food is ready" (3.4.141) in order to investigate "the cause of thunder" (143).⁹ Beyond identifying a need through his "Poor naked wretches" speech to reeducate himself in order to reengage with justice, Lear also proposes a method to this reeducation: he is going to isolate himself from human artifice in order to discover the more essential natural basis of justice.

Immediately after identifying this need for reeducation, Lear meets a completely destitute character named Poor Tom whom he views as the base essence of human nature. This encounter with what Lear views as the embodiment of the Platonic form of humanity gives him hope that he can not only shake off the superfluous artifacts of the political world, but he can also learn about the secret natures that he previously accepted were inaccessible to

⁹ Craig also points out that Gloucester's presence is announced by a reference to the fire that he carries, which is a classic symbol of artifice: Prometheus stole fire from the gods and thus gave humankind the power to create (182).

him and reserved only for the great gods or the personified storm. Lear's meeting with Poor Tom gives him hope that he might recover the judgment that he feels he has lost with age, but this impossible goal of understanding the essence of humanity instead drives him further into madness.

When Lear first sees the destitute, naked, and mad character Poor Tom, Lear notes his wretchedness and even sees himself: "Nothing could have subdued nature / To such a lowliness but his unkind daughters" (3.4.66-7). In this portrait of lowliness, however, Lear contrasts the essential nature of humanity with the superficiality of the political world. While addressing Poor Tom, Lear asks "Is man no more than this?" (95-6) before declaring that "thou art the thing itself. Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art" (99-100). This description of Poor Tom as the basic essence of humanity contrasts with his description of himself, his Fool, and Kent: "here's three on's are sophisticated" (98).¹⁰ When Lear briefly views Poor Tom as the Platonic form or essence of humanity, he undresses to match Poor Tom in his nakedness not simply to rebel against the artificial world that his clothes represent, but also to gain knowledge of the natural essence he sees in Poor Tom.¹¹ This desire to learn these more fundamental truths is also why Lear finally settles on addressing Poor Tom as a philosopher, a "learnèd Theban" (145) who can teach Lear how to reconstruct his knowledge of natural order so that he can reengage with justice.

¹⁰ The Fool primes Lear to make this distinction by introducing Poor Tom as fundamentally distinct from the physical world; not a body, but rather "A spirit, a spirit. He says his name's Poor Tom" (3.4.41).

¹¹ Craig argues that "[c]lothing, to Lear's unfastened mind, represent—or better still, epitomizes—the *artificial*, in contradistinction to the natural" (182) because it is the "most elementary product of art, and thus of art per se" (185). Craig explains that Lear disrobes in order to "join Poor Tom in what he has come to see as the natural state of man, to become the thing itself—*unsophisticated*" (182).

However, the play uses two methods to demonstrate that Lear's pursuit of this essence of humanity is utterly futile because of his epistemic limits. First, Lear begins to again display signs of madness as he pursues this transcendental knowledge, and he also fails to comprehend basic truths about Poor Tom. Lear cycles through vastly different comparisons to try to understand Poor Tom with the same speed and confidence with which he alternated between arraiging and praising the storm. Kent correctly suggests that Lear is inaccurately projecting his own situation onto Poor Tom, but Lear responds to this correction by saying "Death, traitor!" (66), a violent response that revisits the same repudiation of Kent from the love test. Lear then compares Poor Tom to a corpse and an animal before seeing him as the Platonic form of humanity and, finally, a philosopher. By ironically giving the title of a philosopher to a character who presents as a madman, *Lear* demonstrates how far away Lear is from recognizing the philosophical truths he seeks. The fact that Lear begins to once again display diverse signs of madness—quick, confident, and contradictory judgments married to irrational anger—also emphasizes that Lear is reaching for knowledge that lies beyond his epistemic limits. Second, the futility of Lear's desire to access these fundamental truths is dramatically obvious to the audience because the character "Poor Tom" is merely a disguise that Edgar uses to deliberately and successfully hide his identity. James Kearney argues that the play's "thwarted expectation [of recognition] creates a character who is always more than he seems" (455), and "the dramatic irony of the audience's knowledge of the identity of the figure in disguise renders visible the secret interiority, the unknowable excess of the other" (457-8). The audience's awareness of Edgar's secret identity makes clear that Lear's various methods of incorrectly judging the disguise of Poor Tom are woefully futile.

No other character—including his own father—is able to identify Edgar until he chooses to reveal himself in the final scene. This is an important difference between Lear's misidentification of Poor Tom and his misjudgment of his daughters: Lear is not the only one who is fooled by Edgar's deception. Edgar's ability to hide his identity from the rest of the characters helps clarify that Lear's goal of understanding the essence of humanity is not only simply futile *for him*; what makes this goal futile is *not* Lear's particularly poor judgment, his age, or his vulnerability to deception. Rather, the problem is universalized. The play demonstrates that human reason is limited and fallible, and even if Lear is right in believing that there is an underlying natural order, this ordering principle lies outside of the epistemic limits of human reason. The play seems to affirm this lesson that skepticism teaches through the madness that Lear suffers while chasing after knowledge that lies outside of humanity's epistemic limits. By cycling through radically different and consistently incorrect judgments of Poor Tom, Lear demonstrates the limits of human reason precisely by avoiding the possibility that these limits exist.

It should be noted that the play is not criticizing Lear for his pursuit of knowledge as much as it is criticizing him for his dogmatic belief in metaphysical order. If Lear's fantastically poor judgment were the only one the play investigates, *Lear* might be pessimistically interpreted as trivializing philosophical pursuits of knowledge. However, the claim that human knowledge is impossible is ultimately a dogmatic claim just as Lear's unwavering belief in a metaphysical order is a dogmatic belief. The play as a whole criticizes Lear for his dogmatic belief and the confident arrogance that it creates, and it offers an example of a character who seeks out knowledge without falling victim to his own arrogance. In contrast to Lear, Edgar works within his epistemic limits, and the play celebrates this

choice by rewarding him with a relatively accurate understanding of the people and events around him. For example, while Lear is making rash and incorrect judgments of Poor Tom based on his limited and flawed interpretation of metaphysical order, Edgar is carefully and correctly judging Lear based on his own experiences. Edgar is able to feign insanity rather than succumb to it because he does not extend beyond his epistemic limits, but Lear's madness progresses when he refuses to acknowledge that his epistemic reach might fall short of comprehending metaphysical order. Edgar's ability to stay sane while accurately judging Lear suggests that the play endorses skepticism not to trivialize human reason or to create unsurmountable doubt, but to challenge dogmatic beliefs by dramatizing the limits of human reason.¹²

Edgar demonstrates his awareness of his epistemic limits by interpreting the world around him through his own experiences rather than through his understanding of any objective principle. For example, Edgar takes careful note of both the similarities and differences between his experiences and Lear's. While witnessing Lear in a fit of madness, for example, Edgar states "My tears begin to take his part so much / They mar my counterfeiting" (3.6.19-20), acknowledging that he is only playing the part—merely counterfeiting—the madness that Lear actually suffers. He also notes that what "makes me bend, makes the King bow / He childed as I fathered" (Quarto 3.6.102-3), comparing and

¹² Pyrrhonian skepticism was in conversation at the time Shakespeare was writing due to the recent discovery of the writings of Sextus Empiricus. The Academic skeptics emphasized following the most probable truths while admitting that we cannot ultimately know the truth, but because Pyrrhonian skeptics warned against all claims of certainty, they also attacked the Academics' claim that knowledge is impossible. Pyrrhonian skeptics emphasized conforming to the appearances of things without asserting that these appearances are always incorrect. Both Academic and Pyrrhonian skepticism, however, attack the Stoics' claims of comprehensible knowledge.

contrasting their reactions to destitution and being betrayed by their family.¹³ An important distinction emerges here; Edgar believes that his knowledge is limited by his own experiences whereas Lear believes that his knowledge can penetrate the underlying metaphysical structure of reality and discover a universal truth. Edgar's judgment is far from perfect, but it is no worse than Lear's. Edgar is similarly vulnerable to deception, having been tricked by his brother into believing that their father Gloucester seeks his life. However, Edgar also demonstrates that he is able to make relatively accurate judgments based on his own experience alone. Edgar is able to discover and stop his brother's crimes even though there is no ghost to reveal injustice as in *Hamlet*, nor are there any witches to foretell the future as in *Macbeth*. Edgar interprets others through his own experience, but he also recognizes the limitations of this frame of reference. Unlike Shakespeare's other tragic characters including Lear, Edgar does not search for knowledge beyond the limits of human reason or expect his knowledge to be infallible.

Edgar stays well within the limits of his reason because he does not attempt to understand natural order like Lear does.¹⁴ Edgar displays this antiessentialist metaphysical

¹³ These lines are said in soliloquy after the trial of the joint stool, which is only included in the 1608 Quarto version. However, René Weis argues that the inclusion of Edgar's soliloquy at the end of 3.6 is important to explain how he separates from the group on the heath and reappears by himself in 4.1.

¹⁴ My reading of Edgar's antiessentialist metaphysical belief contrasts with many scholars who read him as a righteous Christian savior who restores natural order in the final scene. These scholars tend to emphasize the similarities of "good" characters like Edgar and Lear in order to contrast them with what is typically interpreted as the Machiavellian "bad" characters. For example, Robert Ornstein (1960) places both Edgar and Lear in an "idealist" group "who believe in the classical-Christian concept of natural law" whereas "the Machiavellian (or Hobbesian) 'realists'... see in nature only moral physical energy and who view the world as a jungle in which the fittest (i.e. the most ruthless) survive" (260-1). The main evidence that supports this interpretation of Edgar as a character who believes in an objective basis of right and wrong is his declaration in the final scene that "The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices / Make instruments to plague us" (5.3.162-3). Albany's observation that "Methought [Edgar's] very gait did prophesy / A royal nobleness" (167-8) also seems to support his embodiment of both natural and political order; through Edgar's mere appearance, Albany sees the affairs of state unified and aligned with the divine order that prophecies are based on. However, Edgar's appearance as a royal knight might be another disguise that Edgar adopts rather than his true self. Poor Tom is

attitude throughout the play. For example, in Edgar's first lines, he expresses shock in response to Edmund's claim that "these eclipses do portend these divisions," i.e. conflicts, in the kingdom (1.2.126-8). Edmund is clearly mimicking their father Gloucester who, like Lear, expresses belief in a metaphysical ordering of human affairs by saying "These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us" (95-6). Gloucester's illegitimate son explicitly denounces the "excellent foppery" of making "guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars" (109-12), but Edgar, Gloucester's legitimate son, rejects this belief more subtly. Edgar expresses surprise at his brother's prediction based on astrology by asking "Do you busy yourself with that?" (1.2.132). This surprise has two possible causes: first, Edmund might be acting out of character, or second, Edmund might not find the study of astrology worthwhile. Edmund responds by assuring Edgar that the predicted effects of the eclipses "succeed unhappily" (133-4) rather than reassuring him of his faith in astrology, and Edmund's choice of reassurance suggests that Edgar doubts this metaphysical order rather than his brother's belief in this order.

This initial suggestion of Edgar's antiessentialism is made clearer by his premeditated choice to take up his first disguise of Poor Tom. In soliloquy, Edgar acknowledges that he has been disinherited of his father's material wealth and social status, a change that causes

only the first of many disguises that Edgar utilizes throughout the play, and the persona he adopts in the last scene is probably another one of these many disguises. His meticulous staging of his entrance as a righteous knight, the reveal of his identity after defeating his brother, and his dramatic retelling of the death of Gloucester all seem careful and premeditated, suggesting that Edgar is constructing a new disguise rather than suddenly revealing his authentic self. There are also good reasons as to why Edgar would want to adopt this disguise: if Edgar is using these strategies to gain reverence and respect, these choices are apparently effective since Albany admits to Edgar that he "must embrace thee" (168). Edgar's use of disguises is in itself a recognition of humanity's epistemic limits because a disguise only succeeds outside of these limits. Edgar's pervasive use of diverse disguises should make the audience suspicious about his endorsement of a moral metaphysical order in what appears to be a meticulous performance in 5.3. More reliable indicators of his metaphysical beliefs can be found when there is no reason for Edgar to lie, such as when he is speaking to his illegitimate brother or directly to the audience.

him to view his identity as completely eradicated. He states ““Poor Turlygod! Poor Tom!’ / That’s something yet. Edgar I nothing am” (2.3.20-1), and strips himself of his clothing to adopt this disguise. When Lear removes his clothing, he believes that he is getting closer to his essential being, but when Edgar strips, he does not believe that he is being purified into some more natural and primary state. He clearly differentiates himself, “nothing,” from his intended disguise, “something.” The “something” that is Poor Tom is simply more useful to his goal of escaping his father’s bounty. The 1608 Quarto includes a line from one of Gloucester’s servants that explains how bedlams like Poor Tom have a “roguish madness” that “Allows itself to anything” (3.7.101-2), clarifying that Edgar has good reason to choose this disguise for the particular advantage it offers in moving safely through the kingdom. Edgar’s sense of identity is rooted in constructed human relationships that do not survive outside the conventional and human world of politics; however, Lear desperately clings to the idea that the core of his identity is housed in an internal essence that is independent from the temporal and changing world around him.¹⁵

I argue that Lear and Edgar’s opposing beliefs in an intelligible metaphysical order are closely related to their real and feigned madness, but these metaphysical beliefs alone do not account for their madness or lack thereof. Lear does not begin to go insane until he is forced to question his interpretation of natural order. Lear only falls into madness when his daughters’ unnatural behavior and the pitiless storm force him to reconsider his understanding of metaphysical order. In other words, Lear is driven insane by the active epistemic investigation of this order rather than the mere belief in this order. In contrast,

¹⁵ Lear’s essentialism is communicated through the confusion he expresses when he is treated differently after abdicating political power: “Doth any here know me? This is not Lear: / Doth Lear walk thus? speak thus? Where are his eyes?” (1.4.199-200).

Edgar does not try to understand any underlying metaphysical order because he does not believe such order exists, which is why he does not authentically suffer from madness although he suffers from the same destitution and filial ingratitude as Lear. Through this contrast, Edgar and Lear's real and feigned insanity clarifies that madness in *Lear* is a consequence of pursuing knowledge that lies outside of one's epistemic limits.

Thus, Lear's madness is cured only when he finally abandons this impossible goal of achieving an infallible judgment based on metaphysical order. Some scholars like St. Hilaire who look for signs of redemption in the play argue that Cordelia is ultimately responsible for this transformative effect. St. Hilaire suggests that Cordelia's "no cause" (4.6.69) is an example of "radical pity—that is, a pity that turns away from the judgments of justice entirely" (494), which offers Lear an alternative to the obsession with worldly justice that drives him mad. However, the shift in Lear's madness is signaled by a clear change in the certainty of his judgments, a shift that occurs even before Cordelia's example of radical pity. When he first wakes, Lear repeats the assertiveness that is characteristic of his previous fits of madness; he confidently judges that "You do me wrong to take me out o'th'grave" (4.6.39) and tells Cordelia "You are a spirit, I know" (43). Lear judges the people he sees more cautiously after confessing "I fear I am not in my perfect mind" (57), stating "Methinks I should know you, and know this man, / Yet I am doubtful" (58-9). This shift from confident rashness to cautious humility signals Lear's return from madness, and this shift happens even as Lear restates his confidence in worldly justice by saying "if you have poison for me, I will drink it" (66), confessing that he has wronged Cordelia and offering to accept any punishment she thinks he deserves. Importantly, when he predicts how Cordelia will react, he

bases this prediction on how he has been treated by his other daughters rather than his interpretation of natural order:

“I know you do not love me, for your sisters

Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.

You have some cause, they have not.” (4.6.67-9)

Lear is confident that Cordelia does not love him because he believes that the daughters whom he has treated well do not love him. If Goneril and Regan have determined that Lear is not worthy of love, it makes sense according to Lear’s personal experience that the daughter who he knows he has wronged would judge him at least as harshly. Lear’s return from madness thus is explained by his acceptance that his knowledge is fallible and limited to his experience. However, this does not mean that he abandons justice as a concept as St. Hilaire suggests; rather, like Socrates, Lear admits to his ignorance and offers to drink poison for his crimes. Lear remains confident that natural law can be known and implemented by people who do not struggle with the mental disabilities that Lear feels prevents him from this knowledge. He abandons his obsession with natural order only because he is too “old / And foolish” (77-8) to have this knowledge, but in asking Cordelia to judge him, Lear hopes that she might be able to interpret metaphysical order and judge accordingly. Skepticism ultimately cures Lear of his madness, but Lear only realizes the limits of his own knowledge. He fails to realize the broader epistemic truth that the play teaches: humanity’s knowledge is limited and fallible, not just Lear’s.

CHAPTER III

JUSTICE

Beyond being the primary factor that accounts for the difference between their real and feigned insanity, Edgar and Lear's contrasting belief in an intelligible natural order also influences their engagement with the political world. While Lear must be captured and essentially dragged along with his daughter's army, Edgar proactively follows the action in order to see the outcome of the battle between the three daughters' forces. Edgar also seeks out information by intercepting letters between the combatants, and he uses this information to plan an alternative course of action in case Cordelia's army fails. Edgar, not Lear, is ultimately the character who defeats the evil forces in the play, and his ability to correct these injustices highlights Lear's inadequate response to the chaos that results from his mistake in the love test. Rather than trying to fix this mistake, Lear removes himself from political action because he believes that he cannot act justly without understanding the natural order that determines right and wrong. However, his madness indicates that this understanding lies outside of his epistemic abilities, and when he is unable to achieve this impossible standard for political action, he completely abandons the possibility of rejoining political life rather than creating a more reasonable standard.

The Trial of the Joint Stool

The trial of the joint stool particularly demonstrates Lear's belief that he must completely understand the nature of justice before actively correcting injustice.¹⁶ In his

¹⁶ The trial of the joint stool is a scene found only in the 1608 quarto version of the play. Editor René Weis suggests that the presence in the 1623 Folio version of free-floating references to the cut trial scene "strongly points in the direction of a botched surgery" between the two versions.

madness, Lear hallucinates that a joint stool is his daughter Goneril, and he attempts to arraign the hallucinations of his daughters in a trial that is equally illusory. With the misplaced confidence that is characteristic of his madness, Lear asserts himself as “a king, a king!” (3.6.11) before declaring that he “will arraign [his daughters] straight” (16). With this same vigor, Lear selects the judges who will oversee the trial. In doing so, Lear emphasizes the wisdom of his selections, referring to Poor Tom as a “most learned justicer” and the Fool as “Thou sapient sir” (17-8), imagining them as justicers who not only have the power to sentence Goneril and Regan to punishment, but also the knowledge to sentence them justly. There are three reasons why it is important that Lear imagines Poor Tom and his Fool as wise judges in his daughters’ trial. First, imagining a trial demonstrates that Lear is not simply concerned with punishing his daughters; he is sincerely seeking justice, not revenge. Second, Lear puts his own judgment on trial by testifying as a plaintiff rather than casting himself as a judge, creating the opportunity for his understanding of justice to be validated by his wise judges. Finally, his selection of a madman and a fool as wise judges signals how tragically far Lear is from the truth that he seeks.

Lear’s initial confidence indicates that he begins the scene with the hope that his understanding of justice is correct and that it can be properly executed in the political world. Lear communicates this confidence through his incredibly concise testimony: “I here take my oath before this honourable assembly she kicked the poor King her father” (3.6.42-4). Lear believes that Goneril’s unnatural behavior will be as obvious to the wise judges as it is to him, causing him to offer the court a shorthand testimony rather than a precise accounting of Goneril’s misdeeds. He extends this shorthand with Regan, whose corrupt nature is so self-evident to Lear that he believes it does not even require explanation to the judges: her

“warped looks proclaim / What store her heart is made on” (49-50). Lear’s brief accusations indicate that he does not believe he has to justify the basis of his moral claims; he optimistically assumes that his wise and just judges share his understanding of the natural basis of justice.

Despite what he views as obvious crimes presented to knowledgeable judges, Lear nevertheless hallucinates that his daughters escape the trial before a verdict is reached. The trial fails to confirm Lear’s understanding of justice and its compatibility with the political world, and without this comfort, Lear loses confidence in both. Regarding the relationship between politics and natural order, Lear indicates that he now recognizes a division between true, natural justice and human attempts to be just by accusing the previously praiseworthy justices of “corruption,” calling them “False justicer[s]” for letting his daughters escape (3.6.51-2). In blaming the failed trial of his daughters on the mistake of false judges, however, Lear preserves his belief in a true justice. Lear does not lose faith in justice as a concept, but he does express doubt that it can be actualized in the political world. Lear responds to the failure of the trial by seeking an even deeper and more reliable basis of natural order than when the scene began. During the trial, Lear claims that Regan’s unnatural heart is self-evident, but after the escape of his imagined daughters, Lear asks for Regan to be anatomized so that he can “see what breeds about her heart” (70-1). Regan’s mere appearance is no longer a sufficient demonstration of her unnatural character in Lear’s mind, so he seeks explanation for her cruel behavior in a more intrinsic physical property. When the trial fails to verify his understanding of natural law and its relation to the political world, he responds by seeking this understanding in an even deeper and more inaccessible basis of nature.

Lear's frustration with the political realm manifests in his increased disdain for normal human customs that seek to cover over a person's essential nature. This is why he also requests Poor Tom to change his "Persian attire" (3.6.74-5), suggesting that the person he once viewed as the bare, unsophisticated essence of humanity is now corrupted with superfluous and unnatural human artifice: a loincloth. Craig explains that clothing epitomizes "the artificial, in contradistinction to the natural" in Lear's mind (182), which is why Lear desires to rid himself and his company of clothing at multiple points during his descent into madness. But though Lear at first strips himself with the admiral goal to "shake the superflux" and "take physic, pomp" so that he can "show the heavens more just" (3.4.33-6), Lear goes far beyond ridding himself of his royal decadence; Lear ends up completely rejecting the very basic human practice of wearing clothes. Craig points out that by praising Poor Tom for his bare nakedness without acknowledging that Tom repeatedly asserts that he is cold, Lear seems to forget that clothes serve an important natural function (183).¹⁷

Lear continues to subordinate the human world to the natural so severely that his conception of justice devolves into complete naturalism in which a human being has the same ethical obligations as a fly. In Act 4, Lear commits the naturalistic fallacy by confusing what is natural with what is good, and he believes that this natural law applies equally to humans, animals, and insects:

I pardon that man's life. What was thy cause?

Adultery?

¹⁷ In Act 1, Lear acknowledges this function of clothes in pointing out the normal human practice of sacrificing functionality for beauty, suggesting that he loses rather than gains knowledge during his philosophical investigation: "Allow not nature more than nature needs, / Man's life is cheap as beasts'. Thou art a lady; / If only to go warm were gorgeous, / Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear'st, / Which scarcely keeps thee warm" (2.4.255-9).

Thou shalt not die; die for adultery. No,
The wren goes to't, and the small gilded fly
Does lecher in my sight. 4.5.106-10

Lear's obsession with discovering natural order sends him deeper and deeper into madness by chasing an unattainable truth. It is not without literary precedent that a character, driven to madness, is also brought closer to truth and justice, but this is not the message of *Lear*. The play instead suggests that Lear's attempt to gain knowledge of natural law causes him to misunderstand basic necessities of human life like clothing, fire, shelter, and food, and through his suffering in a trial that is doomed from the start, the play condemns rather than celebrates Lear's epistemic pursuit of natural order.

Ancient and Modern Political Philosophy

Though Lear's first attempt at philosophical investigation ironically leads to insanity, it should be noted that his general approach is characteristic of ancient philosophy. Lear's foundational belief is that there is an essential organizing principle in nature, much like Plato's theory of Forms or Aristotle's four causes. The play makes these similarities explicit by using language that is characteristic of these ancient schools of thought; Lear tells Poor Tom that he is "the thing itself" (3.4.98-9), meaning the Platonic form of man, and he asks him "What is the cause of thunder?" (143). Lear also acts out the philosopher's part in Plato's cave analogy. In this analogy, the philosopher realizes that the images he sees on the walls of the cave where he is trapped are mere shadows of puppets being projected by a fire behind him. After escaping the cave, he is initially blinded by the painful truth of the real world that is illuminated by the sun. Lear's cruel daughters force him to have a similar

jarring realization of his ignorance, and, like the philosopher in this analogy, he chooses to brace the unforgiving storm even though his company is eager to escape to a more comfortable hovel. Craig also reasonably argues that Lear's specific request for poison is a very deliberate reference to the hemlock that Athens sentences Socrates to drink (187).

Though Lear can be compared with various ancient approaches to natural philosophy, his political philosophy is distinctly Platonic. Lear is interested in discovering the highest good through an objective order and ordering himself according to his knowledge of this good. Lear, following Plato, glorifies the internal ordering of the soul according to the philosopher's understanding of the intelligible but inaccessible world of Forms, especially the idea of the good (508e). Lear shares Plato's emphasis on using philosophy to discover an intelligible order that is objective and discoverable by all. Machiavelli broke from this ancient tradition that focused on the highest good, and he revolutionized political philosophy in the sixteenth century by encouraging leaders "to follow the real truth of things" rather than what he dismisses as "an imaginary view of them" (ch. XV). He distinguishes himself from classical thinkers like Plato by attempting to discover this effectual truth through studying the rise and fall of principalities that exist rather than philosophizing about the unattainable best regime that is discussed in the *Republic*. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli teaches his readers that the only order that exists in the world is the order that leaders impose onto it, and he glorifies those princes of merit who can use their understanding of the effectual truth to impose their will over "Fortuna," or chance. By abolishing all models of order, Machiavelli places the responsibility of creating order on the princes themselves.

Edgar seems to follow Machiavelli's approach to political philosophy by accepting Albany's request in the final scene to "Rule in this realm / And the gored state sustain"

(5.3.295). This line is thoroughly Machiavellian because it prioritizes the current, lived world rather than any theoretical “higher” realm like Plato’s intelligible realm of the Forms. The ideal regime that Plato’s Socrates describes in the *Republic* can only exist as an idea, but Edgar is called to rule in this earthly realm and to involve himself with a regime that is “gored” rather than ideal.¹⁸ His understanding of the ideal regime or the idea of good is less important than his ability to sustain the kingdom through the very real challenges that threaten it. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli offers praise for political leaders who are able to preserve their regime by “knowing how to distinguish degrees of disadvantage, and in accepting a less evil as a good” (ch. XXI). This responsibility to preserve the gored state is precisely the challenge that Edgar accepts.

Machiavellianism is oftentimes too superficially depicted in literature through a selfish, unprincipled character who employs nefarious means to satisfy their personal desires. For example, Robert Ornstein glosses over Machiavelli’s revolutionary emphasis on the effectual truth, instead describing Lear’s two ungrateful daughters and Gloucester’s bastard son as typical Machiavellian “realists” simply because they “view the world as a jungle in which the fittest (i.e. the most ruthless) survive” (260-1). Authors who seek inspiration for their villains have been especially intrigued by Machiavelli’s claim that it is better to be feared than loved (ch. XVII). However, this is a conclusion that Machiavelli bases on a deeper philosophical argument. Because the prince must impose order rather than align himself with an objective order, Machiavelli argues that it is better to be feared than loved

¹⁸ There are multiple compelling interpretations of the *Republic*, but I share Machiavelli’s opinion that Plato knowingly describes a Republic that cannot be actualized in the political world. Unless we are supposed to believe that Plato’s Socrates is honestly recommending eugenics, the abolishment of the family, and sending children to observe the atrocities of war, I do not think that the Republic should be read literally.

because “being loved depends upon his subjects, while his being feared depends upon himself” (ch. XVII).¹⁹ The claim that inspired numerous literary villains thus has two main premises. The first and relatively less fundamental one states that fear is a better method of control than love. The more primary premise, however, is that the prince must manufacture control in a world that is both chaotic in its randomness and apathetic to human needs.²⁰

Edmund fully embraces the lesser premise in his power-hungry quest for political control, but he seeks control to satisfy his own selfish greed rather than the preservation of the political regime; in fact, Edmund is rebelling against the regime that denigrates him with the label of “bastard.” Edmund not only resents being labeled as a bastard, but he questions the ontological status of his baseness:

Wherefore should I

Stand in the plague of custom and permit

The curiosity of nations to deprive me

For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines

Lag of a brother? Why bastard? Wherefore base,

When my dimensions are as well compact,

My mind as generous, and my shape as true

As honest madam’s issue? Why brand they us

With base, with baseness, bastardy? base, base? 1.2.2-10

¹⁹ Machiavelli also argues that love is less reliable than fear because “love is held by the tie of obligation, which... is broken on every whisper of private interest; but fear is bound by the apprehension of punishment which never relaxes its grasp” (ch. XVII). In other words, Machiavelli argues that the prince is better able to control fear than love.

²⁰ In *The Prince*, “Fortuna,” or chance, begins as a personified pagan goddess who intentionally challenges the weaknesses in the principedom. Machiavelli then transitions to describing Fortuna as an indifferent natural force (a river). This happens as Machiavelli essentially rejects God through omission in Chapter XXV, and it parallels his overall shift from the “imaginary” to the “real truth of things.”

Edmund describes baseness and legitimacy as social constructs, a “plague of custom” created by “the curiosity of nations” rather than a physical quality (1.2.3-4). But though Edmund does not believe that these concepts are “real” in the same way that older characters like Gloucester and Lear believe that they are real, Edmund is prepared to manipulate these concepts and, through his “invention” (20), achieve the benefits of the “Fine word ‘legitimate’” (18). Edmund is a typical Machiavellian literary villain because he communicates a thorough indifference to all standards of ethics and selfishly espouses that “All with me’s meet that I can fashion fit” (164), but Machiavelli would certainly think that Edmund is a poor student of his political philosophy. Though Edmund is more than willing to “follow evil courses if he must” while seeming, whenever possible, to have good qualities (XVIII), Edmund appropriates Machiavelli’s proposed method in a way that harms Machiavelli’s proposed ends; Edmund’s greed and selfishness unleash uncontrolled chaos that threatens rather than preserves the political body.

Edmund’s detractions from Machiavelli’s broader political philosophy make him a compelling villain according to literary standards, but Shakespeare also faithfully engages with the heart of Machiavelli’s political philosophy through Edgar. This Machiavellian hero recognizes that the world is unordered, and he is willing to be “other than good” (ch. XV) by lying and deceiving others to reach his goals. The difference between Edgar and Edmund is that Edgar’s goals are ultimately benevolent and selfless whereas Edmund’s are selfish. In contrast to Edmund’s desire to hoard power, Edgar feels a sense of responsibility to correct injustice and defend virtue in the unordered world. Shakespeare dramatizes the revolutionary nature of Machiavelli’s political philosophy by putting these characters in conversation not

only with each other but with the Ancient philosophy that Lear represents and from which Machiavelli intentionally departs.²¹

Edgar's Machiavellianism is clear in his obviously political choice to accept the throne in the final scene, but it also permeates his actions throughout the play. He uses his variety of disguises not only as a means of self-preservation, but as benevolent lies intended to help the people he is knowingly deceiving. In the Dover scene, for example, Edgar takes advantage of his father's blindness by manufacturing three different characters in order to foil his father's suicide attempt and convince him that "Thy life's a miracle" (4.5.55). Through the first, Edgar convinces Gloucester that he stands at the edge of a dangerous cliff. After Gloucester jumps, Edgar uses a second disguise to convince Gloucester that he has survived a perilous fall and is now miraculously alive at the bottom of the cliff. In order to sell the lie that "the clearest gods... have preserved thee" (73-4), Edgar also describes seeing the first character who knowingly led Gloucester to the cliff as a demonic creature with eyes like "two full moons," "a thousand noses," and "Horns whelked and waved like the enraged sea" (70-1). While transitioning between these various disguises, Edgar briefly speaks to the audience as himself to identify the benevolent goal of what he acknowledges is an unnecessary and complex scheme: "Why I do trifle thus with his despair," he explains, "Is done to cure it" (33-4). In reassuring the audience of his benevolent intentions, however, Edgar seems to acknowledge that his actions appear cruel at worst and morally ambiguous at best, but he is willing to engage in this morally ambiguous action in order to cure his father of his despair.

²¹ In *The Prince*, Machiavelli appears to directly contrast his political philosophy with Plato's: "Republics and Princedoms have been imagined that were never seen or known to exist in reality" (ch. XV).

Shakespeare scholar Stephen Greenblatt, a literary historian credited with establishing the criticism of new historicism, suggests that Shakespeare's "miracle minting" in the Dover scene "offers a double corroboration" (120) of the contemporary work of Samuel Harsnett, who compared possession and exorcisms to theater to argue that they are both fraudulent performances (118). Greenblatt argues that Edgar's attempt to "create in Gloucester an experience of awe and wonder" is similar to how the exorcists tried to manipulate their audience at public exorcisms (118). However, Edgar's clear manufacturing of the illusion of wonder creates "a disenchanting analysis" of religious practices like exorcisms (118). Edgar cannot possibly convince himself of the lie that he is telling, but although he knows that the illusion he creates for his father is not true, he still believes that his lie is useful in his benevolent goal to cure his father of his suicidal desires. In Edgar's mind, as in Machiavelli's political philosophy, what is effective need not be what is true. Edgar's dishonesty should make us uncomfortable, but his benevolent lies are perhaps the most harmless form of the "well employed" cruelties "which are done once for all under the necessity of self-preservation" that Machiavelli encourages (ch. VIII).²²

Other examples of Edgar's knowing appropriation of religious concepts include his approval of his father's prayer to the gods to "Let not my worser spirit tempt me again / To die before you please" (4.5.212-3). Edgar's approval—"Well pray you, father"—finishes his father's line, but it seems to distance him from the prayer rather than involve him in it. He seems to recognize that the function of prayer gives his father comfort from his suicidal despair, which is why he encourages his father to "pray that the right may thrive" (5.2.2)

²² The "self-preservation" that Machiavelli discusses in this quote is referring to the preservation of the principedom rather than the preservation of a life of a single person. The end goal of "preservation" is slightly different between Machiavelli's political philosophy and Edgar's attempt to save his father, but the "other than good" (ch. XV) means are essentially the same.

before he leaves his father to observe the war between Cordelia and her sisters' forces. Again, Edgar encourages prayer without participating in it. Because he has already made preparations in case Cordelia and Lear's forces fail, and also because he is never shown praying to the gods for intervention or support, we can assume that Edgar asks his father to pray only to bring him comfort rather than to faithfully petition the gods for intervention.

It should be noted that religion is not the only concept that Edgar manipulates, and his fraudulent appropriation of religious practices does not necessarily mean that these practices are fraudulent in general. Just because Edgar disguises himself as a Bedlam beggar does not mean, obviously, that all Bedlam beggars are feigning madness in order to freely move around the kingdom as Edgar does. Shakespeare has Edgar utilize his father's demonstrated religious belief not to trivialize these beliefs as Greenblatt suggests, but rather to show that Edgar realizes they are an effective way to reach his benevolent ends. Similarly, Edgar manipulates Lear's hallucinations in order to save him from the imaginary dogs that bother him: "Tom will throw his head at them... For with throwing thus my head, / Dogs leapt the hatch, and all are fled" (3.6.6-30). Though Edgar does not experience Lear's hallucinations, he is able to pretend that he does in order to convince Lear that the dogs are being driven away. Like his other manipulations, Edgar lies by pretending to see Lear's hallucinations not to mock Lear, but to help ease his suffering. Edgar's impressive ability to employ diverse means to adapt to changing situations and achieve his benevolent ends contrasts sharply with the Platonic ideal of knowing a single highest good, the basis of truth and justice, that only exists in the intelligible world of the Forms.

Edgar's active commitment to benevolent ends contrasts with Lear's commitment to an objective source of justice. What justice *is*, however, is the famous unanswered question

from Plato's *Republic*, and it is the question that Lear first chases into madness and then into impotent inaction. Lear sets temporal and artificial political matters aside in pursuit of this more eternal and essential truth, and he is so distracted with discovering the essential basis of justice that he does not even attempt to remedy the most obvious cases of injustice around him—whether this be as egregious as his daughter's abuse of power in blinding Gloucester or as miniscule as the coldness of the destitute Poor Tom. He does not remedy these injustices because he believes that knowledge of the good is prerequisite for just political action. And when he determines that he is too old and fond to have access to this knowledge, he abandons his philosophical pursuit of justice and his concern for injustice, leaving the responsibility of knowing the good and making political decisions to younger generations. The particular method Lear employs to escape the political world is telling: he fantasizes about living the rest of his life with his daughter Cordelia in prison, a place where he never has to make a political decision again.

Edgar, on the other hand, acknowledges an inescapable temporality and integration with our external environment by saying "Men must endure / Their going hence even as their coming hither. / Ripeness is all" (5.1.9-11). Edgar recognizes that the real world that humans participate in is complex and in flux, meaning that he must be constantly vigilant in analyzing the demands of changing circumstances. Edgar does not indicate any objective basis from which he might answer the difficult question of what justice *is*, but he is capable of the easier task of identifying injustice. Unlike Lear, Edgar is willing to offer immediate help to his father and to Lear when he sees them suffering. Importantly, he offers this help even though he is not sure that he will be successful. While reflecting on whether his ruse at the Dover cliff will be able to save his father, he admits that he does not know "how conceit

may rob / The treasury of life, when life itself / Yields to the theft” (4.5.42-4). Edgar does not rely on or wait for an infallible understanding of justice in order to respond to the immediate suffering and needs of the people around him; rather, he is constantly engaged in political matters and responsive to the current state of affairs around him.

My reading of the play’s endorsement of Machiavellian political philosophy relies heavily on one interpretation of the 1623 Folio version of the final scene, an interpretation consistent with the overall argument that I read in *Lear*. The last lines of the play are attributed to Albany in the Quarto and to Edgar in the Folio, an important difference as the play’s final lines endow their speaker with the final moral authority in the play. In both versions, Albany realizes that he is next in line for the throne, and he repeats Lear’s mistake in the love test by attempting to divide his kingdom between two people, Kent and Edgar. Kent denies this offer in both versions and heavily implies that he will commit suicide, following Lear in death. In the Quarto, Edgar does not respond, which suggests that Albany is forced to go on as king after no one accepts his offer. In the Folio, however, Edgar speaks the last lines of the play, but these lines neither explicitly accept nor deny Albany’s offer:

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. 5.3.299-302

These ambiguous lines leave room for interpretation, but I argue that Edgar accepts the throne for the same reason that Albany and Lear both attempt to escape it. Lear expresses a desire to escape the burdens of the political world in favor of resting in Cordelia’s “kind nursery” (1.1.122) in the first scene: “’tis our fast intent / To shake all cares and business

from our age, / Conferring them on younger strengths, while we / Unburdened crawl toward death” (38-40). Lear thus begins the play with a tendency to subordinate the challenges of political life to his idealistic fantasies, and he indulges in these fantasies without guilt because he believes the “younger strengths” that he gives his kingdom to will be guided by their understanding of natural law. Albany is a thoroughly religious character, making him similar to Lear in that he believes in a just and orderly metaphysical force.²³ There is little evidence to suggest that the immense tragedy of the final scene causes him to lose his religious faith, but he does recognize a sharp divide between “this realm” and any other realm that Albany might believe exists. Albany has the jarring realization that he would have to shift his focus from what is divine and good in order to rule over what he now recognizes is a “gored state,” a responsibility that he quickly attempts to abandon. However, Edgar’s constant attention to the changing political world suggests that he has already had this realization. His disbelief in a natural order and his recognition that human reason is fallible and vulnerable to deception is united in his Machiavellian approach to politics. The responsibility of living in the difficult political world with imperfect knowledge is too much for characters like Albany and Lear to bear, but though Edgar knows that he has the potential to fail, he is willing to pursue justice imperfectly.

²³ Albany is arguably the most religious and the most ineffective character in the play. Albany consistently looks for proof of divine ordering, as indicated by his response to learning that a servant mortally wounded Cornwall in a fruitless attempt to stop him from blinding Gloucester: “This shows you are above, / You justicers, that these our nether crimes / So speedily can venge” (4.2.45-8). Dollimore finds evidence for antiessentialism (or a lack of metaphysical order) in the play through Albany’s prayer that the gods defend Cordelia (5.3.230), which is quickly answered by Lear carrying her dead body onto the stage (202). The generalized tragedy in the final scene and the disorder that it suggests seems too much for Albany to bear: “If there be more, more woeful, hold it in, / For I am almost ready to dissolve, / Hearing of this” (194-6). Like Lear, Albany’s belief in a metaphysical source of order makes him incredibly unprepared to face (let alone address) the challenges of the political world.

CHAPTER IV
MARGINALIZATION

There are some scholars who would disagree with my celebration of Edgar's engagement with politics. Danielle St. Hilaire especially fears that Edgar's duel with his brother reduces justice in the play to the benefit of the stronger, or "might determines right" (486). St. Hilaire can be grouped with A.C. Bradley, Jonas Barish and Marshall Waingrow, and other scholars who celebrate what they view as an internal transformation that can only happen once Lear finally escapes from the hierarchical divisions of the corrupt political world. St. Hilaire in particular disparages worldly justice because "justice is inseparable from the violence of hierarchical relations, making any attempt to find 'justice' in the sense of equity and fairness in the world of the play automatically self-defeating" (492). Though St. Hilaire is right in identifying that justice needs to be enforced, the play does not advocate for living in a world where virtuous people like Edgar who are "pregnant to good pity" (4.5.217) refrain from defending themselves and others from forces like Edmund who believe that "All with me's meet that I can fashion fit" (1.2.164). Rather, the play points out in its darker moments that the pursuit of justice is often messy and far from perfect, but still optimistically yearns toward a world where justice offers protection to society's most marginalized citizens: the servant, the beggar, the fool, and the daughter.

This great difference between my interpretation of justice in *Lear* and St. Hilaire's, however, is a matter of scope rather than one of irreconcilable values: Lear and Edgar's contrasting metaphysical and epistemic beliefs directly affect how they treat others, and beyond their personal engagement in politics, their opinions regarding the intelligibility of a natural order also impacts their attention to and encouragement of the voices in the kingdom.

By reading the play too narrowly in search of evidence for Lear's redemption, the humanist readings fail to account for the clear marginalization that begins in the first scene and lasts nearly until the final lines in the play. Cordelia, Kent, Edgar, and the Fool all face clear and extended forces that silence them or severely limit what they can say. By ignoring these marginalizing forces, the humanist readings also fail to acknowledge the full tragedy of Cordelia's death; humanists mostly recognize that she is unfairly robbed of life in the last scene, but they fail to recognize that she has been unfairly robbed of her voice during the entire play.²⁴ The play fundamentally demands that we examine the forces behind the marginalization that pervades it and ultimately culminates in Cordelia's tragic death.

An obvious force of marginalization is demonstrated in the first scene when Lear abuses his power to punish the honesty of his daughter Cordelia and his loyal servant Kent. Lear ultimately silences both of these characters through banishment, and they both acknowledge that Lear has this power over them before they are punished. Cordelia acknowledges this power indirectly through what most Lear scholars recognize as legalistic language that is carefully measured rather than naturally spoken.²⁵ Though it is difficult to decipher exactly *what* Cordelia is concealing, she clearly *is* concealing something, suggesting that she does not feel free to speak honestly. Kent more clearly acknowledges the power relationship between him and Lear that requires his obedience by explicitly defying it. Lear reminds Kent of his power by stating that "The bow is bent and drawn; make from the shaft" (1.1.141), but Kent boldly responds that "To plainness honour's bound / When majesty falls

²⁴ I must qualify that the humanist perspectives "mostly" acknowledge Cordelia's tragic death because A. C. Bradley absurdly argues that Cordelia is "rather set free from life than deprived of it" because she is "superior to the world" that kills her (324).

²⁵ William Harold Craig most notably describes Cordelia's legalistic language as "more benefitting some logic-chopping lawyer than a tender lover" (126).

to folly” (146-7). Kent repeatedly insists upon the power of his own voice to check Lear and to correct the misjudgments he makes. In another bold display of honesty, Kent wisely asks Lear to “Reserve thy state” and “check / This hideous rashness,” and correctly identifies that “Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least” (147-9). He chooses to end this honest, wise, and objectively truthful speech by suggesting that Lear is specifically misjudging Cordelia’s speech: “Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sounds / Reverb no hollowness” (151-2). In his last line before Lear sentences him, Kent again declares his own voice as one that will not be silenced, insisting that “whilst I can vent clamour from my throat, / I’ll tell thee thou dost evil” (164-5). Indeed, there are fifteen lines of disobedience before Lear finally banishes Kent’s voice from his kingdom precisely because Kent refuses his command to be silent.

Kent is the first character who adopts a disguise to continue serving Lear, but Edgar is the character who most clearly demonstrates the veiled speech that these disguises require.²⁶ Edgar differs from Kent in that he has the additional challenge of moving between many disguises and dialects to hide his true intent. Edgar clearly demonstrates the difficulty of this challenge by struggling to maintain his disguise during points of high emotion, like when he explains to the audience that he feels he “cannot daub it further” (4.1.52) after encountering his blinded father or when, in another aside, he explains that his “tears begin to take [Lear’s] part so much / They’ll mar my counterfeiting” during Lear’s fit of madness in the trial of the joint stool (3.6.56-7).²⁷ Shakespeare seems to be making an intentional choice by having the

²⁶ Kent’s disguise primarily involves obscuring his voice rather than his image, further suggesting that Lear specifically banishes Kent for his voice rather than his disobedience: “If but as well I other accents borrow / That can my speech diffuse, my good intent / May carry through itself to that full issue / For which I razed my likeness” (1.4.1-4).

²⁷ René Weis also argues that Edgar’s last line in this scene, “Poor Tom, thy horn is dry” (3.6.69) suggests that Edgar “is exhausted with playing the part of Tom” (231n69).

character who recognizes the great importance of honest and open communication in the final lines of the play be the same character who spends the most time and effort struggling to speak in voices that are not his own.

Edgar is sometimes forced into disguises for his own self-preservation, and he sometimes chooses to adopt disguises to meet specific purposes. One reason why Edgar might choose to use a benevolent lie is because he believes that the honest truth will be ineffective; he chooses to conceal the truth because he thinks that his disguises will be more useful to his ends than honesty will. Honesty must be received well by the person to whom it is offered, and if this necessary condition is not met, then there is no point in attempting to communicate honestly. Although refusing to listen is a more subtle way to devalue someone's voice than physically silencing them, it effectively marginalizes them just the same by making any attempt at communication pointless. Lear's treatment of the Fool especially demonstrates this kind of marginalization. The Fool is less concerned about being punished for what he says because, as he explains to Lear, he is punished for everything he says: "I marvel what kin thou and thy daughters are. They'll have me whipped for speaking true, thou'll have me whipped for lying, and sometimes I am whipped for holding my peace" (1.4.156-9). The Fool is not silenced out of fear for Lear's power, but Lear does silence him by effectively ignoring his veiled truths and deceptively harsh criticisms. The Fool is able to express these hard truths without being punished like Kent because Lear receives them as harmless entertainment. Shakespeare thus creates the Fool that Erasmus describes in *Praise of Folly*: "it is a privilege of fools to speak the truth without giving offense" (191) because "[t]hey can speak truth and even open insults and be heard with positive pleasure" (119). Lear repeatedly asks for his Fool in Act 1 because of this pleasure he offers, but Lear extracts

the entertainment value of the Fool's harsh truths without actually listening to these truths. This is why Lear is shocked when Goneril and Regan both treat him unkindly even though the Fool has correctly predicted that this would happen. Some of the Fool's best jokes even rely on Lear's ability to ignore his Fool entirely; for example, Lear does not seem to notice when the Fool asks him "whether a madman be a gentleman or a yeoman," causing Lear to accidentally and ironically answer the question by saying "A king, a king!" (3.5.10-1).

Because Lear quickly follows up this answer by saying "To have a thousand with red burning spits / Come hissing in upon them!" (3.5.10-12), it is clear that he is not aware of the Fool's question or his self-implicating answer because he is preoccupied with thoughts of revenge against Goneril and Regan.

Lear's tendency to ignore his Fool is especially clear when he fails to acknowledge his sudden disappearance in Act 3. Lear perhaps fails to notice his absence because he meets Poor Tom and envisions him as the Platonic form of humanity at a time when he is more interested in discovering metaphysical truth than being entertained. For this reason, Lear ironically shifts his attention away from the Fool in order to better study Poor Tom, but Tom is a mere disguise—the opposite of the Platonic form that Lear would like to discover. The Fool is the character who consistently confronts him with hard truths, but Lear disarms these truths by refusing to listen to them.

The repressive forces that breed silence is thus a theme that affects many characters and spans the entirety of *Lear*. The character who undeniably struggles the most with silence, however, is Cordelia. Her first line, spoken to the audience through an aside, introduces her and her silence in the same line: "What shall Cordelia speak? Love and be silent" (1.1.61). Lear will forcefully banish her voice from his kingdom, but the way Lear silences his Fool—

by refusing to listen to him—is the same way that Lear continues to silence Cordelia even after he abdicates the power he wielded over her in the first scene. Cordelia’s last lines are spoken immediately before Lear’s prison fantasy, in which he completely ignores the fact that Cordelia is lamenting her and her father’s situation and begging him to take action to correct it:

We are not the first

Who with best meaning have incurred the worst.

For thee, oppressèd king, I am cast down,

Myself could else outfrown false fortune’s frown.

Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters? 5.3.3-7

Importantly, Cordelia is not content to escape to prison like her father. Her last spoken words are a gentle plea for Lear to confront the family members who seek to imprison them, but Lear responds with vehement denial: “No, no, no. No. Come, let’s away to prison” (5.3.8). He then weaves a beautiful fantasy filled with forgiveness, blessings, laughter, prayer, and gilded butterflies. Scholars who look for signs of Lear’s redemption frequently cite this transcendental poetic quality as proof of Lear’s internal transformation; St. Hilaire, for example, claims that Lear adopts “an entirely different worldview” and “is now open to a new possibility, one that gives him the ability to connect with his daughter outside the hierarchies of justice” (496-7). However, St. Hilaire fails to recognize that justice is precisely what Cordelia asks for in her last line of the play, and Lear denies her this justice in order to have her exclusively and perpetually for himself. St. Hilaire celebrates Lear’s escape from the hierarchies of the political world, but this escape does not free him to have a more genuine or loving relationship with his daughter; infatuation is not love, and love does not

injure its object. Though Lear's prison speech is dramatically gorgeous, we must fully embrace the painful truth that it also silences Cordelia; she never speaks again.

Shakespeare makes a very intentional choice by having Cordelia's last line in the play be a request for Lear to reengage with politics for the sake of his most loved daughter, a request that Lear fervently denies four times. In asking her to join him in his prison fantasy, he not only denies her wishes but makes his own happiness dependent on her agreement to abjure the political world as well. In this way, Lear forces Cordelia to choose between her love for her father and her own life in the world. Despite the suffering that humanist scholars would like to believe makes Lear more empathetic, Lear completely ignores Cordelia's genuine sorrow; rather than comforting her, he stifles the parts of her that do not fit with his idealized version of her that he casts in his fantasy—a daughter who loves him so dearly that she not only sacrifices her freedom and future for him, but does so happily. At best, Lear fails to realize these great differences between their situations; Lear is near death and confused about his role in the world, but Cordelia is young and had a bright and politically engaged future to live as the queen of France before finding herself caught in Lear's prison fantasy. At worst, Lear recognizes these differences and asks Cordelia to join him in prison all the same.

Performances of this scene might be able to color Cordelia's response to Lear's speech; perhaps he successfully comforts her, and perhaps she goes willingly to prison with a smile on her face. But the text does not offer its readers this hope. Through Lear's callous request for her to "Wipe thine eyes" (23), all that the text states about Cordelia's response is that she is still crying at the end of his speech. Whether or not readers of the text imagine Lear and Cordelia's exit from the scene as hopeful or solemn, the audience will soon

discover that Cordelia is murdered in the prison that Lear draws her to: ultimately silenced in death.

If Lear's prison fantasy suggests some sort of transformation, it is not a transformation for the better in terms of the effect it has on the people around him. Lear's rejection of the political world selfishly and self-indulgently silences those who rely on him to seek justice. In both the first and the last scene, he silences Cordelia; he banishes her voice during the love test and again with his prison fantasy. What has not been previously noted, however, is how both of these silences have the same cause, which is Lear's dogmatic confidence in an intelligible natural order. Lear acts rashly when he believes that his judgment is perfectly aligned with the natural basis of justice, and when he eventually accepts that he does not have epistemic access to this natural order, Lear refuses to act at all. Lear does shift from radically denying his epistemic limits to radically embracing them, but Pyrrhonian skepticism merely warns against the dangerous dogmatic belief that Lear demonstrates in the first and second acts; it does not teach a skepticism so extreme that it leads to quietism. *Lear* as a play teaches that members of society must face the challenges in a difficult world with the understanding that knowledge is imperfect. Lear's inability to accept this truth—his inability to live in the world with real, limited, fallible, and *human* knowledge—is the reason Cordelia is silenced in both the first and the last scene; he is unable to recognize his epistemic limits in the first, and he is unable to cope with them in the last. In terms of Lear's effects on the people around him, Lear is not substantially transformed by the events of the play; Lear only changes by making the same mistake in a different way.

Lear also marginalizes his subjects in a more subtle way than punishing them for their honesty or refusing to listen when they do speak. Lear's unshakeable belief in an intelligible

metaphysical order robs his subjects of the opportunity to speak to the king about their diverse experiences. As king, Lear endows himself with a perfect understanding of the natural order that governs human affairs and determines right and wrong. Because he thinks that truth is discoverable via an intelligible metaphysical order rather than in lived human experience, Lear does not seek out the opinions of his subjects. Of course, Lear's lack of motivation to listen to his subjects does not mean that he does not care about them as king. Dollimore unfairly accuses King Lear of failing to care about the "houseless heads and unfed sides" (3.4.33) in his kingdom until he shares common experience with them. Dollimore suggests that Lear ignores the suffering in his kingdom "not through callous indifference but simply because he has not experienced it," making *Lear* "a world where pity is the prerequisite for compassionate action, where a king has to share the suffering of his subjects in order to 'care'" (191). However, Lear reproaches himself for caring *too little* about his subjects rather than failing to care at all: "O, I have ta'en / Too little care of this" (3.4.32-3). Perhaps King Lear did ask himself what his most destitute subjects need, but by experiencing their situation, Lear discovers that his calculation did not match their true need. There is little evidence that Lear is an apathetic king who ignores the needs of his subjects; rather, he obsesses over "higher" metaphysical order to the exclusion of the lived experiences of his subjects. His belief in an intelligible and ordered universe gives him false confidence that he can judge the needs of those in radically different situations than his own. Despite Lear's best intentions, his false confidence prevents him from allowing his subjects to speak to their diverse needs. Lear believes himself to have all of the answers while king. With this confidence, he sees no reason to ask others for their opinion.

While Lear's tendency to not give others the opportunity to speak and his violent responses to claims with which he disagrees with obviously perpetuate silence and punish honesty, Lear also silences his subjects by severely limiting what they can and cannot say. In the love test, for example, he requires his daughters to speak, but he does not allow them to speak honestly because he creates a situation in which there is only one acceptable response that avoids personal and political catastrophe. As Craig points out in his political analysis of the love test, Lear's plan is a rational political strategy that is conducive to his goal of preventing conflict after his death. Lear plans to divide his kingdom into three predetermined sections and "intends by his circulation of his royal person to keep the country stitched together" (131). However, this plan depends on Lear's daughters to express their unconditional love and fealty for him. Lear does not invite his daughters to honestly speak their minds; rather, he asks them to profess "vows of everlasting devotion... meant to reinforce and reaffirm the oaths of fealty" (123). Lear does not allow them to "speak" in the normal sense of the word as much as he casts them in roles in his political performance without their consent, which is why he encourages Cordelia not simply to speak but to say what he wants to hear. Lear makes his intentions clear by asking his favorite daughter "what can you say to draw / A third more opulent than your sisters'? Speak" (1.1.84-5). When Cordelia's answer does not satisfy him, Lear threatens her to "Mend your speech a little / Lest you may mar your fortunes" (93-4). Lear is clearly not interested in what Cordelia has to say; he instead insists that she play the role that he has created for her.

The consequences of Cordelia refusing to perform this role are catastrophic for her, for Lear, and for the kingdom. Not only is she disowned, banished, and stripped of her dowry, but Lear is forced to divide his crown and the kingdom it symbolizes between two

ambitious daughters “as if half a coronet would rest securely on either one’s head” (Craig 132). Lear loses his favorite daughter, and his plan to avoid political turmoil turns into a recipe for civil war. The love test fails so fantastically that the audience might wonder if Lear even considered the risks of his plan before committing to it, but Lear’s genuine emotional shock at Cordelia’s refusal and his lack of a satisfactory back-up plan indicates that Lear perhaps did not even consider whether it was possible for his love test to fail. This indicates an even deeper problem regarding Lear’s silencing of his subjects than his limitation on what they can and cannot say: Lear *does not know* that he is limiting his subjects in this way. He is confident that his daughters love him unconditionally, so he does not think that inviting them to publicly proclaim this love is limiting because Lear thinks it inconceivable that they would want to say anything other than what he expects them to say. In this way, Lear’s unreasonable confidence in his judgment undermines the purpose of communication itself; Lear thinks he knows what his daughters are going to say, so he asks them to speak not to listen to them with the expectation of learning something new, but to make a public demonstration of what he is confident they are going to say.

Despite Lear’s great suffering and contested transformation between the love test and the final scene of the play, Lear never seems to learn how to listen. Right before he dies of heartbreak with Cordelia’s corpse in his arms, he reminisces that “Her voice was ever soft, / Gentle and low” (5.3.246-7), taking his final moments in the play to remember the sound of Cordelia’s voice rather than the content of her words. Lear’s silencing of Cordelia is thus incredibly thorough: he gives her opportunities to speak only when her speech is made into mere sound, one that has a predetermined purpose; he then banishes her for refusing to speak her assigned part, nor does he seem to know how to listen when or if she does speak. She is

silenced repeatedly by Lear in the play, most finally and most poignantly by his “No, no, no. No” at her suggestion that she might have something to say.

Whereas Lear’s inability to cope with his epistemic limits causes him to silence the person that he loves most, Edgar’s recognition of the limits of his reason motivates him to uplift the voices in his kingdom to compensate for these epistemic limits. Within the functional epilogue of the play, Edgar encourages the survivors and the audience to “Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say” (5.3.300). Edgar’s epilogue validates Cordelia’s choice to refuse to play the part that Lear created for her in the love test, but he also acknowledges that refusal was all that Cordelia had the power to do. Empowered by the final lines of the play, Edgar uses this opportunity to allow his subjects to do what Cordelia was never free to do: speak what they feel. Edgar spends the majority of his lines in the play censoring his words through disguises, and it is fitting that the character who has this first-hand experience of marginalization validates Cordelia’s choice to refuse to perform in Lear’s love test. This is one reason why Edgar’s delivery of the last lines in the 1623 Folio version is more compelling than Albany’s delivery of the same lines in the 1608 Quarto. Edgar’s demonstrated acknowledgement of humanity’s epistemic limits and his constant engagement with the challenges in the political world make clear why he is motivated to uplift the voices around him; open and honest communication is the best way to combat the inevitable injustices of the political world. Because Edgar knows that there are limits to each person’s reason and that this reason is fallible, he encourages the voices around him to fill in these gaps and fix these unavoidable errors in our understanding. Edgar clearly acknowledges that thoughts, feelings, and experiences are private to each individual, and he recognizes that the best way to learn about these private experiences is to offer others the freedom to explain

them. Edgar focuses on lived human experiences because, unlike Lear, he does not believe that he can interpret any objective reality in a way that can explain subjective human experience. He does not believe that there is a natural order that determines behavior, and he does not think that he can discover a physical or transcendent essence that explains reality outside of human experience of it. Whereas Lear is hostile to truths that question his judgment of justice during his reign, Edgar recognizes that diverse and honest perspectives can help him rule as a well-informed and responsive king. Edgar's acceptance of skepticism teaches him a cautious humility that not only motivates him to allow others to speak honestly, but to work to encourage them to do so.

CHAPTER V

CORDELIA'S SILENCE

My analysis of Cordelia's silence participates in a lively critical debate as to why Cordelia responds to Lear's invitation to speak in the love test by saying "Nothing" (1.1.87). Because Cordelia has so few lines in the play, and because her refusal of the love test is so central to the play's plot, it is quite difficult for Shakespeare scholars to discuss Cordelia without engaging with this question, yielding to very diverse results.²⁸ Just to name a few, Feminist Shakespeare scholar Janet Adelman simply suggests that Cordelia refuses "to speak unless she can speak herself truly" (124). In contrast, Harry Berger argues in his complex study that Cordelia wants to punish Lear; she intentionally "commits Lear to his other daughters for the punishment he deserves" by forfeiting the love test so that she "will ultimately be vindicated by the effects of their punishment," fulfilling her desire to have her "unpublished virtues" finally revealed and appreciated (44-5). Berger also claims that Cordelia's decision to not participate in the love test "is made partly on competitive grounds" with her sisters (42), but Stanley Cavell argues that Cordelia is unable to compete with her sisters in the love test because "she could not flatter; not because she was too proud or too principled... but because nothing she could have done would have been flattery" (62). Cavell thus reads Cordelia's defiance in the love test not as a rationally-motivated decision like Berger does, but as an emotional response: "She is outraged, violated, confused, so young" (63). Leon Harold Craig likewise attributes Cordelia's apparent speechlessness to her "political naivete" (125), arguing that Cordelia is too "preoccupied with her own immediate feelings" to understand Lear's benevolent political plan to give her the most opulent part of

²⁸ Cordelia has a mere 31 lines in both the 1608 Quarto and 1623 Folio versions of *Lear*.

the kingdom (126). However, Craig maintains that Cordelia partly rejects the love test out of pride, as indicated by her appreciation for the fact that “she lacks the manner of speech that would please him” (128).

But these analyses—along with the one I will offer—only explain why Cordelia chooses not to speak; the separate and more difficult question surrounds what Cordelia does say when Lear urges her to speak in the love test. Why does Cordelia refuse to give Lear the answer he wants when this answer would be a truthful statement? Why does she instead claim to love Lear “According to my bond, no more no less” (92)? Craig points out that the language Cordelia uses in her response sounds more like “a formula more benefitting some logic-chopping lawyer than a tender lover” (126-7), which contrasts starkly with her emotional and articulate responses throughout the play: “Even on this occasion, what follows her sterile formality proves that she can be passionately articulate when it suits her purpose, despite her earlier insistence to the contrary (‘Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave my heart into my mouth’)” (127). In contrast, Adelman views this “legalistic language” as an example of Cordelia’s “familiar inarticulateness” that is consistent throughout the play (125). As a final example, Barish and Waingrow interpret Cordelia’s dutiful response as a reminder to Lear of the “vital and dynamic” nature of their reciprocal bond. I think that these scholars are right to investigate Cordelia’s motivations in the love test, but I also think that this is a question that we are meant to ask and inevitably fail to answer. Cordelia simply does not have enough lines in the play that reveal her independent thoughts, beliefs, and motivations that underlie her enigmatic response, but the self-consciousness that pervades the lines that she does have insists upon her complex subjective experience. Thus, we should conclude that

Cordelia does have a reason for her enigmatic response and that this reason is deliberately withheld from us.²⁹

I believe that Cordelia's mysterious motivations in the love test are designed to endorse the skepticism that the overall play teaches in an essential way. In the world of the play, Lear goes insane in his denial of epistemic limits whereas Edgar's awareness of his epistemic limits allows him to take effective action against sources of suffering. In this way, the play contains the truth that human knowledge is limited and fallible, but dramatizes that truth best in Cordelia. An audience's inability to understand Cordelia's motivations validates this truth in the real world; we are faced with our own epistemic limit through her seemingly inexplicable response in the love test.

I cannot explain Cordelia's legalistic language in the love test, but I instead offer what I think is a better question: why are we prevented from understanding Cordelia's motivations? The answer to this lies in the silence that is inextricable from her character; the same silence that she introduces herself with in her first line, the silence that she struggles with throughout the play, and the ultimate silence that creates the bulk of the play's tragedy through her death. Cordelia simply does not explain herself, and neither the audience nor the other characters can understand her unique subjective experience unless she offers her own account of them. Not only is she physically prevented through a banishment that lasts from the end of the first scene to late in the fourth act, but when given the opportunity to speak, she responds with "Nothing." Any rationale for Cordelia's rejection in the love test that a Shakespeare scholar might puzzle together—pride, naivety, emotional distress, revenge,

²⁹ Adelman also convincingly argues that the "asides through which we are initially introduced to [Cordelia] and her exchanges with her father and her sisters make us keenly aware of her inner life" during the love test (124).

validation, independence—is not as important as the question of why Cordelia does not or cannot express this motivation herself. The tragedy of Cordelia’s death cannot be fully realized without recognizing the silences that led to it; the final strangulation of her life must be considered alongside the constant strangulation of her voice.

Cordelia’s Internalized Silence

Because it is the source of so much of the tragedy in the play, *Lear* demands that the extent of Cordelia’s silence be fully recognized. To a certain degree, Cordelia is complicit in this silence; there is no external force that requires her to be silent and to resign from political life in Lear’s prison fantasy. Janet Adelman would disagree; she argues that Cordelia is “[i]ntroduced to us initially as a subject,” but Shakespeare reconstructs her “as the creature of Lear’s need” (124).³⁰ Adelman limits Cordelia’s agency by attributing this choice to Shakespeare, and she avoids the difficult question of why Cordelia is complicit in her silence at the high cost of limiting Cordelia’s subjectivity to the first scene. We must recognize Cordelia’s choices to be silent as choices and try to understand the causes behind them.

I argue that Cordelia has internalized and habitualized her own silence. Lear’s ultimate power over her requires Cordelia to constantly censor herself; she must identify and work within her father’s expectations to protect her own well-being. The love test perfectly demonstrates how Lear can impose disastrous consequences on those who displease him, and in his own words to Cordelia, Lear thinks it “Better thou / Hadst not been born than not t’have pleased me better” (232-3). Given Cordelia and Lear’s closeness, she has had ample

³⁰ Cavell similarly observes that “The final scene opens with Lear and Cordelia repeating or completing their actions in their opening scene; again Lear abdicates, and again Cordelia loves and is silent” (“The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of King Lear,” 68).

opportunity to learn that her future depends on pleasing her father even before Lear makes it explicitly clear in the first scene.

Years of Cordelia's necessary attention to Lear's expectations becomes a habit that is so deeply ingrained in her that it is automatic in the conscious activity that she reveals in her first two lines. Cordelia demonstrates her hyperawareness of Lear's perspective by referring to herself in the third person in her first two lines: "What shall Cordelia speak? Love and be silent" (1.1.61). Asides are typically used to reveal interior experiences that are not disclosed to the other characters on stage, but the fact that Cordelia is the only character who is introduced through asides suggests that Shakespeare means to emphasize the complexity of her subjective experience.³¹ When Cordelia refers to herself in the third person, she considers herself from Lear's perspective before she considers her own perspective, and she offers her own perspective only in response to the expectations that originate from her father: to the imagined question "What shall Cordelia speak?" Cordelia answers, "Love and be silent." By prioritizing how her father perceives her in her first aside, Cordelia is introduced not just as a self-conscious subject, but as a subject who is also concerned with how she is perceived by other subjects, especially her father.

Cordelia's first priority is to try to understand Lear's perspective, and her second is to identify whether she has any potential deviations from that perspective that might upset Lear. After Lear rewards Goneril and Regan for their flattery with thirds of the kingdom, for example, Cordelia realizes that her values differ from those of her father:

³¹ Berger argues that through this revealed conscious activity, Cordelia "self-consciously observes herself," meaning that she "possesses a strong theatrical sense of her image and role" (42), but these two observations are not totally identical. There is a difference between being conscious of oneself and being conscious of others' perception of oneself, and although Cordelia demonstrates both of these forms of consciousness in her asides, she does not do so simultaneously.

“Then poor Cordelia,
And yet not so, since I am sure my love’s
More ponderous than my tongue.” 75-7

Once again, Cordelia refers to herself in the third person while considering how her father will view her after she fails the love test. Working within his perspective, Cordelia recognizes that she will be “poor” in terms of land and also in terms of Lear’s opinion of her, a reasonable prediction given that he has praised his eldest daughters for their false professions of love. However, Cordelia again considers herself only after her estimation of her father’s perspective, this time taking careful note of the difference between them. Cordelia then offers a *correctio*; she is not poor, and she is not poor precisely because of the quality that she believes will cause her to be poor in her father’s opinion: she has a love more ponderous than her tongue. Cordelia is not only constantly concerned with her father’s perspective, but she is also acutely aware of the differences between their perspectives. After years of practicing this awareness, Cordelia seems to have habitualized this process of self-censorship as demonstrated by the repetition of this process in the play’s opening scene; it happens automatically in the conscious experience that she divulges through her asides.

Tragically, Cordelia’s silence goes beyond her habitualized self-censorship. Rather than being constantly worried about the danger that her voice can create for her, Cordelia does the opposite and devalues her own voice. In the few lines that she has in the first scene, she expresses doubt in the effectiveness of her speech three times: first in the confidence that “I am sure my love’s / More ponderous than my tongue” (76-7), then in her claim that she “cannot heave / My heart into my mouth” (90-1), and then again when she claims that “what I well intend / I’ll do’t before I speak” (224-5). Cordelia is not simply saying that her good

intentions cannot be described by words; she is saying that *her* words cannot suit her purposes. This is perhaps why she will later ask the doctor to speak to Lear when he is finally waking from his madness. She trusts the doctor's ability to speak to her father more than her own, and it is only after the doctor reminds her that "'tis fittest" for her to address her father that she gains the confidence to speak to Lear, although she only speaks questions rather than statements to the waking Lear (4.7.37-8). Rather than clearly state her own original thoughts, Cordelia has a tendency to build off the beginnings and frames of others, which is why her most famous lines, "Nothing" (1.1.87) and "No cause, no cause" (4.6.69) are fragmented responses to Lear. However, Cordelia is hesitant only when talking with Lear; when she speaks directly to her sisters, for example, she is much bolder in saying "I know you what you are" (1.1.268), and she even uses imperative commands: "Love well our father" (270). Her depreciation of the effect of her voice, then, is only a problem in her interactions with Lear. Her resigned silence throughout the play and especially during his prison fantasy suggests that she does not have any hope in communicating with Lear; in short, Cordelia has learned that there is no point in talking to someone who does not listen.

Lear struggles to listen to the truths offered by his Fool, so we can reasonably predict that Lear struggled to listen to Cordelia as well.³² They are both objects of his affection, and they are so similar in his mind that he perhaps conflates the two by saying "And my poor fool is hanged" (5.3.279) in the last scene.³³ Because of their similarity in Lear's mind, Lear most

³² William Craig would disagree that Lear is averse to honesty. Craig argues that an honest character like Kent would not love Lear like he does unless Lear also loved honesty, and Gloucester talks about how the events in the love test are unusual. I do not find these arguments convincing; it might be unusual for Lear to punish honesty in this way because it is unusual for Lear to hear honesty. The love test is most likely a rare occasion when Lear asks his subjects to speak.

³³ A.C. Bradley claims that the Fool gets lost in one of Shakespeare's particularly messy tragedies, but Thomas Clayton argues that it is unlikely that Shakespeare simply "forgets" the Fool who abruptly exits the play in

likely paid as little attention to Cordelia's words as he does his Fool. As in the love test, Lear most likely welcomed, rewarded, and perhaps demanded flattery while punishing dissent, creating his own echo chamber where he rarely had to practice the skill of listening. Because of this lack of practice, perhaps Cordelia learned that her speech is ineffective only because the person who loved her the most could not effectively listen to her. Cordelia might feel as though she is far from being able to reach Lear, especially because she most likely devalues her own voice because of her history of failing to reach him. Even if Cordelia's inarticulateness has some other cause,³⁴ it is most likely made worse by her close relationship with a father who resists even well-articulated arguments that contradict his own beliefs.³⁵

Act 3; instead, he suggests that Shakespeare intends to remind the audience of the Fool through this line. Clayton suggests that the Fool and Cordelia become "momentarily merged" in Lear's mind (144).

³⁴ My explanation of Cordelia's tendency to be silent does not preclude Cordelia from choosing to be complicit in Lear's prison fantasy for a combination of other reasons; for example, it is entirely possible that Cordelia sacrifices her own wishes out of love for her father. Adelman is right in pointing out that Shakespeare is one among many authors who create female characters who altruistically sacrifice themselves for others (125). The possibility that Cordelia prioritizes her father's needs over her own should be familiar to the audience; this is, after all, a gender stereotype that persists today. However, I think it is important to recognize all of the factors that contribute to Cordelia's complicity, and Cordelia's internalized silence most likely factors into this decision. Perhaps she would still choose to offer Lear peace through his fantasy even if she had full confidence in her voice and her ability to convince him to reconsider the sacrifice he asks of her. However, I think Cordelia weighs her desire to please her father against her ability to convince him to reconsider his prison fantasy. There is no way to determine whether she ultimately resigns herself to Lear's reality out of love or out of hopelessness, but the fact that she is merely complicit rather than enthusiastic in his fantasy suggests some tension in her decision. We ought to ask ourselves whether Cordelia was completely free to join Lear in his fantasy before too eagerly celebrating her self-sacrificing and altruistic decision.

³⁵ Some examples of logical arguments that Lear responds to with rage are Kent's explanation that Lear bows to flattery (1.1), France's explanation that "Love's not love / When it is mingled with regards that stands / Aloof from th'entire point" (1.1.237-9), his daughter's request to reduce his number of rowdy attendants (2.4), and Kent's explanation that Poor Tom has no daughters (3.4).

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Cordelia's fleeting subjectivity reminds us that everyone has a wealth of subjective experiences the objective eye is blind to. Our frustrating epistemic distance from her as audience members suggests to us what Lear fails to learn in the play: we can only imagine another person's lived experiences, and the best way to prevent this gap from becoming a barrier to justice is to empower others to speak about their experiences openly and honestly. Cordelia's unanswered request in her last line ought to make us wonder how we can best prepare ourselves to respond to calls for better treatment in our daily lives and encourage the voices of those around us. The play demands that we identify and remedy forces of marginalization in our own society, and to do this we must acknowledge that our reason is limited and fallible, be willing to pursue justice imperfectly, encourage others to speak freely, and prepare ourselves to listen with humility.

Lear painfully insists that forces of marginalization are not created solely by self-interested and malevolent characters like Edmund; Lear more thoroughly and more consistently silences Cordelia and, tragically, never realizes his mistake because he confuses it with love. Lear never practices the skill of listening because he is too confident that he is able to intuitively know what is best for his loved ones, but he silences them nevertheless by failing to recognize the reciprocal need for communication. I am highly critical of Lear, but I do not think there is any good reason to doubt that he designs his prison fantasy around Cordelia with the expectation that it will bring her as much joy as it brings him. Lear's relationship with Cordelia demonstrates that loving someone is not automatically the same as caring for their needs. The play insists that we must learn from Lear's mistake: we might not

be capable of providing for each and every need our loved ones have—and that is okay—but assuming that the way we plan to care for a person is the right way to care for them risks silencing the people we love the most.

Lear’s personal failures are inextricable from his political failures, and as much as the play demands that we uplift the voices around us, it also demands that we ensure our political institutions empower the voices of citizens rather than marginalize them. The democratic republic of the United States luckily avoids many causes of marginalization created by the type of monarchical power Lear holds; it separates power among different federal branches rather than giving one group ultimate and unquestionable power, it further decentralizes power among the states, and it requires its elected officials to maintain a certain level of responsiveness to their constituents. But our democratic republic does not automatically avert all causes of marginalization; just because more voices are included in our governmental system does not mean that every voice is given the attention it deserves. Our democracy creates legislation through majority rule, which, we can hope, creates the best policies for the greatest number of people. However, it also means that minority groups have to go through the difficult task of enlisting the help of members of the majority in seeking policy changes.³⁶

³⁶ James Madison acknowledges the dangers of majority factions in representative governments in Federalist 10: “When a majority is included in a faction, the form of popular government... enables it to sacrifice to its ruling passion or interest both the public good and the rights of other citizens” (234). He identifies the “great object” of his inquiries in the Federalist Papers is to explain how the representative democracy outlined in the Constitution works to “secure the public good and private rights against the danger of such a faction” (234), mainly by expanding the sphere of republican government so that “a coalition of a majority of the whole society could seldom take place on any other principles than those of justice and the general good” (291). Rather than optimistically hoping that people and departments work toward the interests of all, Madison emphasizes that the “provision for defense must in this, as in all other cases, be made commensurate to the danger of attack” (288) in Federalist 51. He explains that the framers of the Constitution created a system that gives “each department the necessary constitutional means and personal motives to resist encroachments of the others,” declaring that “[a]mbition must be made to counteract ambition” through “opposite and rival interests” (288). In this way, Madison emphasizes the importance of equipping each person and governmental branch with the ability to defend themselves and their interest against the inevitably encroaching power of others.

Because the majority wields political power in a democratic form of government, a majority that is not responsive to the unique interests of minority groups participates in the same process of marginalization as a king who never learns how to listen to his subjects. Alexis de Tocqueville similarly observed that American democracy has the same potential to tyrannize as a monarchy. To clarify, Tocqueville defines the “germ of tyranny” as “the right and the capability to do everything granted to any power whatsoever” (108), and Tocqueville observed in America a “moral empire of the majority” that was based on the principle “that the interests of the greatest number must be preferred to those of the minority” (104). In other words, tyranny of the majority arises in a democratic society when, like Lear, its citizens have dogmatic confidence in the ethical supremacy of the majority’s political choices. As the French “under the former monarchy, took it as given that the king was infallible,” Tocqueville observes that “The Americans have the same opinion of the majority” (103-4). Though Tocqueville’s observations of democracy in America was colored by France’s history of seesawing between democratic and authoritarian regimes in the 1830s when he was writing, we must acknowledge that our democratic system implicitly affirms that the majority’s authority is the ultimate authority. We must recognize both the strengths and the weaknesses of our use of majority rule in order to expand its benefits and reduce its harms; we can both celebrate the political engagement and community involvement that democracy encourages while defending against its tendency to marginalize minority groups.³⁷ A skeptical methodological approach, for example, might encourage voters and legislators to be more receptive to minority groups who point out how certain policy choices adversely affect

³⁷ Tocqueville explains that the administrative decentralization in American democracy creates these benefits because “the fatherland makes itself felt everywhere,” making each citizen “attached to each of the interests of his country as to his very own” (61).

them; in other words, skepticism might help the democratic majority see their decisions as they are—both the good and the bad—rather than dogmatically believing that what is good for the majority is best for all.³⁸ For this reason, the ability to listen becomes incredibly important in democratic regimes; the dangers that majority rule creates for minority groups can be mediated if majority populations are willing to listen and trust minority groups when they speak about how they are affected by policy decisions implemented by the majority. Ideally, democratic regimes that utilize majority rule will encourage its citizens to keep the interests of minority groups in mind during policy decisions and to recognize the potential of majority rule to tyrannize over the minority. This is an admirable goal, but we must also recognize the absolute necessity of equipping minority groups with defenses against the tyranny of the majority.

Our judicial system satisfies this standard by guaranteeing citizens the ability to defend themselves against oppressive majority rule. Tocqueville especially praised the American judicial system for its insulation from the majority because judges base their rulings on the Constitution rather than on the changing laws the majority create (64). This codified Constitution that our judges draw their authority from also guarantees individual rights and liberties, allowing the judicial branch to offer further protection against potential abuses of majority rule. The judicial system also inherently empowers individuals to protect their own rights by being characteristically passive, meaning that it only operates through individuals who file cases rather than proactively reviewing or censoring laws passed by the

³⁸ Tocqueville similarly notes that any centralized authority, whether democratic or otherwise, cannot intuit the totality of needs within its diverse citizenry: “A central power, however enlightened, however competent one imagines it to be, cannot embrace within itself alone all the details of the life of a great people. It cannot do it because such a task exceeds human powers. When it wishes, through its own efforts, to create and make function so many diverse forces, it contents itself with a very incomplete result or exhausts itself in futile efforts” (57).

legislature. Because the judicial system not only protects individuals from the threat of a tyrannizing majority but does so by guaranteeing individuals the ability to speak on their own behalf, the judiciary effectively answers the play's challenge to empower marginalized voices to demand justice.

By myopically focusing on Lear as a single character in isolation of *Lear* as a whole, the traditional humanist interpretation not only fails to recognize the play's challenge to identify and rectify forces of marginalization, but it works to subvert this message. In hopes of validating the essentialist stoicism that emphasizes our shared nature, such humanist interpretations of the play celebrate Lear's epistemic pursuit of this internal essence and make many of the same mistakes as Lear. Both fail to realize that Lear chases this knowledge into madness, and they celebrate the fact that Lear escapes the hierarchies of the political world without recognizing that he also becomes unresponsive to the needs of those who rely on him. Most notably, the humanist interpretation of Lear fails to acknowledge how his confidence in the intelligible order that they celebrate consistently silences Cordelia, and by refusing to recognize the marginalizing forces that pervade the play, the humanist interpretation dismisses the key consequence of Lear's unacceptable dogmatic belief in natural order and his selfish abandonment of the political world. The play offers extensive suffering to condemn Lear's actions, but whatever suffering the humanists acknowledge, they appropriate as evidence for Lear's redemption; as Bevington puts it, Lear's suffering becomes the cost of his "spiritual wisdom dearly bought" (1204). As long as the humanist perspective of the play continue to dominate critical debate—as long as discussions of *Lear* continue to revolve around common humanity, redemptive suffering, and transcendental transformation—the tragedy of Cordelia's death and Lear's needless suffering will continue

to be inappropriately colored in a way that assigns poetic justice to a play that is meant to shock its audience into understanding the unordered nature of our world and the necessity of taking full responsibility for the systems we design to compensate for its chaos.

The scholars who search for optimism through Lear's redemption are desperately searching for hope in the wrong character. It is Edgar, not Lear, who offers a clear sign of hope for a better future through his acceptance of political power. He identifies himself as a man "Who, by the art of known and feeling sorrows, / Am pregnant to good pity" (4.5.216-7), identifying two separate modes of learning how to care for others: *feeling* sorrows, like the instructive suffering that Bevington claims is the only way that Lear can achieve enlightenment (1204), but also *knowing* sorrows by witnessing experiences other than his own. If Edgar had not made this distinction and instead attributed his good pity solely to his transformative experiences on the heath, this would provide good reason to believe that Edgar is also going to rule under the assumption that he has discovered truth and thus does not need to investigate further or seek new information from his subjects. By acknowledging both forms of knowledge, Edgar recognizes that his conception of truth is informed by his subjective experiences, but this experiential truth can also be bolstered by listening to the subjective experiences of others. Edgar provides additional assurance that he will not repeat the mistakes that Lear makes as both king and subject by urging others to "Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say" (5.3.300). Such a command denounces the flattery that Lear required as king and recognizes that he can learn by listening to diverse experiences rather than experiencing everything firsthand. Because Edgar offers hope for a better future, he assumes the mantle of moral authority in the play and, I argue, functions as a better source of optimism than Lear, who the humanists focus on too narrowly.

In defense of Lear, the humanists too quickly condemn worldly justice for the wrong reasons, such as its dependency on force, its perpetuation of hierarchical power relations, and its inability to actualize an objectively perfect justice.³⁹ Though it is important to think critically about our judicial system and to challenge it to be as fair as possible, it is also important to have realistic expectations that will not cause us to abandon justice for failing to meet an impossible standard. The American judicial system serves too important of a function in counteracting forces of marginalization to abandon it so quickly. However, there are also forces that contribute to marginalization within the justice system itself. The United States' judiciary unfortunately has a long and continued history of unfair trials, plagued by racially-biased sentences, that continue to oppress minority groups.⁴⁰ I want to be clear that discriminatory practices, particularly in criminal trials, are inexcusable and contribute to marginalization and disenfranchisement within our broader society. These discriminatory practices, whether they are intentional or the result of implicit bias, are clear and well-documented abuses of power that demand solutions that are unfortunately outside the scope of this thesis. However, my interpretation of Lear is particularly useful in illustrating the deeper marginalizing effects of these discriminatory practices. Cordelia's internalized silence suggests that the effects of an abuse of power is not limited to the duration of the abuse; it also shapes the expectations of all affected individuals in the future. If the United States'

³⁹ See Danielle St. Hilaire's "Pity and the Failures of Justice in Shakespeare's *King Lear*." *Modern Philology*, The University of Chicago, 2016, pp. 482-506.

⁴⁰ See Besiki Luka Kutateladze, et al., "Opening Pandora's Box: How Does Defendant Race Influence Plea Bargaining?" *Justice Quarterly*, 398-426. Most notably, this 2016 study found that "despite accounting for legally relevant factors that should influence charging outcomes, differences still remain across racial and ethnic groups. Overall, black defendants, and to a lesser extent Latino defendants, were substantially more likely to receive charge bargains that involved pleas to the current charge as opposed to reduced charges. Similarly, blacks, and to a lesser extent Latinos, were far more likely to receive plea offers that included a jail term" (419).

judiciary operates in the same way, its biased sentencing practices engender distrust in the judicial system. This distrust is dangerous to individuals because it might dissuade people from historically marginalized groups from seeking the judicial remedy they deserve. On a broader scale, this distrust is especially dangerous because it might also make groups of people who are most familiar with social injustice—those who best understand its complicated inner-workings and intersectional nature along with the actual damage that it causes—reasonably suspicious of the best available method of voicing their experiences. We must work to rebuild this trust by acknowledging our judicial system’s history of discriminatory practices and actively addressing the continued biases that exist within it today. Otherwise, when minority groups are offered the opportunity to speak through our judicial system, they might doubt whether they will be heard and, like Cordelia, choose to say nothing.

Works Cited

- Adelman, Janet. "Suffocating Mothers in *King Lear*." *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to The Tempest*, Routledge, Chapman & Hall, Inc., 1992, pp.103-129.
- Aggeler, Geoffrey. "'Good Pity' in King Lear: The Progress of Edgar." *Neophilologus*, vol. 77, no. 2, 1993, pp. 321–331. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1007/BF01000143.
- Aggeler, Geoffrey. "Reason's Spark and Skeptical Doubt." *Nobler in the Mind: The Stoic-Skeptic Dialectic in English Renaissance Tragedy*. Associated University Presses, 1998, pp. 13-45.
- Aptekar, Jane. "Jove's Judgment Seat." *Icons of Justice: Iconography & Thematic Imagery in Book V of The Faerie Queene*. Columbia University Press, 1969, pp. 13-27.
- Bali, Shweta. "Mechanics of Madness in Hamlet, Macbeth and King Lear." *IUP Journal of English Studies*, vol. 9, no. 4, Dec. 2014, pp. 81–92. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hlh&AN=100310815&site=eds-live.
- Barish, Jonas and Waingrow, Marshall. "'Service' in King Lear." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 3, Folger Shakespeare Library, 1958, pp. 347-355.
- Berger, Harry. "'King Lear': The Lear Family Romance" and "Text Against Performance: The Gloucester Family Romance." *Making Trifles of Terrors*, Stanford University Press, 1997, pp. 25-69.
- Bevington, David. "King Lear." *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 7th ed., Pearson, 2003, pp. 1201-7.
- Bradley, A. C. "King Lear: Lectures VII and VIII." *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 2nd ed., St.

- Martin's Press, 1904, pp. 243-330.
- Cavell, Stanley. "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*." *Disowning Knowledge In Six Plays of Shakespeare*, Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp.39-122.
- Clayton, Tom. "'And My Poor Fool Is Hanged'" (King Lear 5.3.311). *The Ben Jonson Journal*, vol 19, no. 1, 2012, pp. 142-145.
- Craig, Leon Harold. "The Discovery of Nature: Politics and Philosophy in *King Lear*." *Of Philosophers and Kings: Political Philosophy in Shakespeare's Macbeth and King Lear*, University of Toronto Press, 2001, pp. 112-191.
- Dollimore, Jonathan. "*King Lear* and Essential Humanism." *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, 3rd ed., Palgrave Macmillian, 2004, pp. 189-203.
- Erasmus, Desiderius. *Praise of Folly*. Translated by Betty Radice, Penguin Books, Inc., 1971.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. "Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England." *The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics*, University of California Press, 1988, pp. 94-128.
- Hunter, G. K. "Shakespeare's Last Tragic Heros." *Dramatic Identities and Cultural Tradition: Studies in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, Harper & Row Publishers, 1978, pp. 251-269.
- Kearney, James. "'This Is above All Strangeness': King Lear, Ethics, and the Phenomenology of Recognition." *Criticism*, vol. 54, no. 3, June 2012, p. 455.
- EBSCOhost,
search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsglr&AN=edsglr.A301556533&site=eds-live.

- Kutateladze, Besiki Luka, et al. "Opening Pandora's Box: How Does Defendant Race Influence Plea Bargaining?" *Justice Quarterly*, 2016, pp. 398-426.
- Machiavelli, Niccolò. *The Prince*. Translated by N. H. Thomson, Chump Change Edition, 1913.
- Madison, James. "Federalist 10" and "Federalist 51." *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, Edited by the Hillsdale College Politics Faculty, *Hillsdale College Press*, 2020, pp. 231-7, 287-91.
- Mazzaro, Jerome. "Madness and Memory: Shakespeare's Hamlet and King Lear." *Comparative Drama*, vol. 19, no. 2, July 2018, pp. 97-116. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1353/cdr.1985.0024.
- Montaigne, Michel de. "Apology for Raymond Sebond." *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*. Translated by Donald M. Frame, Stanford University Press, 1958, pp. 318-457.
- Montaigne, Michel de. *Shakespeare's Montaigne: The Florio Translation of the Essays, A Selection*. Edited by Stephen Greenblatt, NYRB Classics, 2014. EBSCOhost, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.easydb.angelo.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsebk&AN=751305&site=eds-live&scope=site>.
- Ornstein, Robert. *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy*. Paperback edition., University of Wisconsin Press, 1960, pp. 224-61.
- Plato. *The Republic of Plato*. Translated by Allan Bloom, Basic Books, 1968.
- Shakespeare, William. *King Lear: A Parallel Text Edition*, edited by René Weis, 2nd ed., Routledge, 2010, pp. 80-339.

St. Hilaire, Danielle. "Pity and the Failures of Justice in Shakespeare's *King Lear*." *Modern Philology*, The University of Chicago, 2016, pp. 482-506.

Strier, Richard. *Unrepentant Renaissance: From Petrarch to Shakespeare to Milton*, University of Chicago Press, 2011, p. 48.

Tate, Nahum. *King Lear*, edited by Lynne Bradley. *Internet Shakespeare Editions*, University of Victoria, 11 Jan. 2019, https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/doc/Tate-Lr_M/scene/Prologue/index.html. Accessed 3 May 2022.

The Times Supplement. "A. C. Bradley: The Surrender to Poetry," May 1936. Found in A. C. Bradley and His Influence in Twentieth Century Shakespeare Criticism by Katharine Lees, 1968, ProQuest LLC, 2016, p. 11.

Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Translated by Stephen D. Grant, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2000.

Van Veen, Otto. Q. *HoratI Flacci Emblemata*. Antwerp, 1607. *Internet Archive*, contributed by the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, 2014. <https://archive.org/details/ita-bnc-mag-00001277-001/page/n86/mode/2up>