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“Slender Knowledge”: Sovereignty, Madness, and the Self in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*

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In *King Lear*, the English law of madness, especially the aspects of testamentary devises, royal accession, waste, and plunder, is thematized in such a way that the conflict between civil order and savage nature is brought to the foreground. This dynamic overshadows, and to some extent disguises what truly lies at the heart of ancient Britain’s woes: a deficit of ontological self-inquiry on the part of the sovereign and his royal retainer, Gloucester, from which all of the other complications ensue.

In the summer of 1453, while at a royal hunting lodge in Clarendon, what had for years been rumored of the English monarch Henry VI finally came to pass: a sudden terror befell the King, an attack that was immediately succeeded by a withdrawal from life so complete that he would not speak, move, wash, or even dress of his own accord. For five years this “darkness” held the monarch, during which time the war of the roses ripened.¹ The trouble of an incapacitated sovereign had presented itself not too many years earlier in France, in the case of Henry’s grandfather. Charles VI, at the age of thirty-four, had his first fit of madness while on campaign in Brittany, turning upon and attacking his own soldiers.²

During such times, an understandable anxiety gripped the respective courts. When the sovereign is not dead but incapable (as Henry was when acceding to the crowns of both England and France at the age of one year), how is the realm to be ruled? When the sovereign is the realm, and the realm has gone mad, the stuff of drama is made. This is so not only because such a quandary is fictively provocative, but also because it is philosophically riveting. For the

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1. Vivian Green, *The Madness of Kings* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 62. Henry “arose” from his madness in 1455, though evidence suggests there were relapses for the rest of his life. *Ibid.*, 68.
2. *Ibid.*, 74. In medieval Europe, royalty was beset by what is now considered schizophrenia. Joan the Mad, Queen of Spain, first displayed irrational behavior due to the philandering of her husband, Philip the Fair, then became completely deranged upon his death, refusing to leave his corpse. *Ibid.*, 90–1. In Shakespeare’s own day, the war-filled reign of Sweden’s Eric XIV, a suitor to Elizabeth II, ended in insanity and imprisonment. *Ibid.*, 128–37.

people of that day and of this, the point was not merely academic or dramatic; it was something against which to prepare, to make contingencies, and above all, to avoid. Madness was so dangerous in the context of the monarch because in such instances reason, considered the “sovereign of the mind,” had been thrust from its throne.³ In short, madness was seen as a kind of political sedition, the overthrow of all that was lawful. And from this dramatic and philosophic conundrum, Shakespeare made his greatest tragedy.⁴

For a good number of critics, it seems settled that King Lear crosses into madness in Act 3, Scene 4.⁵ However long he has feared it, whatever signs have augured it, whichever lines display hints of it, when Lear projects his own plight onto the suddenly-appearing Tom, his madness is manifest. But if attention is moved to a statement occurring fifteen lines earlier from this confrontation, there occurs another confrontation—one that Lear himself names and shrinks from:

O Regan, Goneril, whose frank heart gave you all, —
O that way madness lies, let me shun that;
 No more of that. (3.4.21–2) (emphasis mine)⁶

R.A. Foakes says by “that way” Lear means “dwelling on his own griefs.”⁷ Under this interpretation, Lear believes that to dwell upon the injustices perpetrated against him would precipitate his insanity. Certainly, it is consistent with Lear’s rage and temperament that he should consider this the road to madness. But the fact is, despite his self-admonition, he does indeed go mad a few lines later; further, he is wrong about the way that has led him there. Nothing in the play establishes a direct causal link between his *dwelling* upon his maltreatment and his lunacy. In fact, from the time that he names and shuns that “way” to the time that he asks Tom whether his

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3. Duncan Salkeld, *Madness and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), 81.
 4. Further interest in such matters might have been suggested to Shakespeare by the case of Brian Annesley, a gentleman pensioner to Queen Elizabeth who had lost his senses. The eldest of his three daughters sought to have the old man committed, whereas his youngest, named “Cordel,” petitioned to take custody of him. The events transpired in 1603; King Lear was published in 1605. Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 7:270. In addition, Shakespeare’s first tetralogy is chiefly made up of the life of Henry VI, though he does not address the historical madness of the king in the plays.
 5. See, e.g., Josephine Waters Bennett, “The Storm Within: The Madness of Lear,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (1962): 137–55. For a different view, see Sholom J. Kahn, “Enter Lear mad,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (1957): 311–9. Coppelia Kahn argues Lear’s madness results from rage at maternal deprivation and suppression of the “mother.” Coppelia Kahn, “The Absent Mother in *King Lear*,” in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 33–49. This gendering of the King’s madness as feminine to which Carol Thomas Neely cannot subscribe. Carol Thomas Neely, *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 63 n. 23.
 6. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Arden ed., ed. R.A. Foakes (New York: Nelson & Sons, 1997).
 7. *Ibid.*, 272 n. 21.

daughters have brought him to this pass, he only speaks of two things: that the tempest serves as a distraction from his troubles, and that he has too little tended the plight of the wretched (3.4.24–36). Neither is related to “filial ingratitude.” That complaint is made while in the midst of his mental decline. It is symptomatic of the cause, not the cause itself. Whatever else drives him insane, it is not brooding upon the wrongs done him. So what is the “way”? What is the cause? And what does a proper understanding of it reveal?

Arguments can and have been made, and some long assumed; among them: Lear’s wrath, his shock, or both things taken in conjunction with his frailty.⁸ But none of those reasons are particularly profound or imaginatively provocative; they are even rather pedestrian for a play that is considered the greatest that the great playwright offered, and also his most psychological.⁹ In fact, there is another reason that is consistent with the play’s metaphysical ponderings, and which lies at the root of what the king is, or should be, in relation to his kingdom. The way to disorder Lear does not know and cannot see—typical of both him and his cohort Gloucester—is disclosed in the way that language is used in the play, and in what the King calls upon the law to do. In this greatest of tragedies, an epistemological confusion residing in the king/judge/law-giver both shakes the foundation of the kingdom and mortally compromises the culture. The way to Lear’s madness, when rightly understood, reveals a negative trajectory for the sovereign to avoid. It also provides an Elizabethan perspective on man’s historic disengagement from reality and the cultural damage sustained thereby.

The gravity of what is lost in the chaos of Lear’s madness can be explicated in terms of the historic laws concerning madness, and the role that the King played in their disposition. Carol Thomas Neely points out that “madness” was not a particularly dominant term by which to refer to the many recognized manifestations of mental distress in the Renaissance; melancholy was the more typical “catch-all.”¹⁰ But the dangers of the still-powerful but deranged citizen were acknowledged, regardless of the particular nomenclature. By a lost statute of Edward I, the King of England was given custody of subjects and their inheritances when the subjects were classified as insane.¹¹ In addition, by the statute *de praerogativa Regis* of Edward II (17 Edw. II. St. 2 c.9) “[i]t was provided that the King should

8. E.g., Kenneth Muir, introduction to *King Lear*, by William Shakespeare, Arden ed., ed. Kenneth Muir, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952), xlviii; H. Somerville, *Madness in Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Richard’s Press, 1927), 101; Jerome Mazarro, “Madness and Memory: Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *King Lear*,” *Comparative Drama* 19, no. 2 (1985): 109.

9. Sigmund Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1958) 12:291–301. According to Harold Bloom, Freud had to grudgingly concede that Shakespeare invented the “psyche.” Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Grace, 1994), 60–1. Philip Armstrong’s recent work explores the influence Shakespeare has had on psychoanalysts. *Shakespeare in Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 2001).

10. Neely, 1.

11. Henry F. Buswell, *The Law of Insanity* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1885), 40.

have the custody of the lands of natural fools, taking the profits of them without waste or destruction, and should find them in necessaries, rendering the lands, after the death of the idiot, to the right heirs.” The same statute provided that if any who had lost their wits were to have “lucid intervals,” (i.e., a “lunatic,” not an “idiot”) or were ever to return to their right minds, their property should be returned without the King’s taking anything to his own use (c.10).¹² Henry VIII set up a wardship tribunal to manage the persons and property of the insane (32 Henry VIII. c. 46), though it was later disbanded under Charles II and the old custodial relationship reinstated (12 Charles II c. 24).¹³ The thrust of these royal pronouncements was to establish some means of caretaking, not only for insane persons, but also for what they owned. The afflicted could not lay waste to their property, nor could any potential profiteer or abuser do so. That way, the disordered minds would not wreak havoc upon their lands nor dispossess those who should inherit them. The King, as such, was safeguard against this threat, a royal wall of authority to prevent the further fracture of a world already fractured enough.

But what if that wall itself is fractured, the safeguard somehow compromised? More precisely, what if the King himself is mad, and the lands that risk forfeiture are his kingdom? The problem in *King Lear* is the legal institution that should protect the forfeiture, the waste, the dispossession, is one and the same as that which has caused the forfeiture, waste, and dispossession: The edifice meant to contain and repel has cracked, and there is nothing to stop the devastation that ensues or the dissolution that results. Indeed, with relentless regularity, the ground keeps slipping out from under the characters’ feet, all the way until the final scene. Even then, it can hardly be argued that what has befallen ancient Britain is not ruinous. Though Edgar and Albany are left standing at the play’s close, this may indeed be “the promised end” (5.3.261). So if the play centralizes the importance of the institution’s integrity – and the institution is here instantiated in the person of the King – especially in its prevention of this chaos, how could it all have been prevented? What is the “way” to be avoided?

In *King Lear*, when the faculty of reason is assaulted, and finally destroyed, it is assaulted by what was understood by the Elizabethans to be its opposite, the appetite. In Shakespeare’s comedies, the appetite and the “will” are synonymous, and are always opposed to reason.¹⁴ The difference here is that the appetite/will has a larger counterpart in *Lear*, one revealed in the howling tempest, the greed for power, the lust of the unconsecrated bed. Unlike the meliorative role she plays in the festive comedies and problem plays,¹⁵ here Nature has a savage face, and appears in her reddest

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

14. A.G. Harmon, *Eternal Bonds, True Contracts: Law and Nature in Shakespeare’s Problem Plays* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 60, 148.

15. *Ibid.*, 78.

guise. From the outset, the bastard Edmund is her representative (though he is not alone in that role). “Nature” is his goddess, and to her “law” (a facetious use of the term) are his services bound (1.2.1–2). With her help, the *illegitimate* Edmund will top his *legitimate* brother Edgar, have his “land” (1.2.16) by his “wits” (1.2.181); and is promised that very land by their father, who will find a way to seize¹⁶ Edmund of all he cannot inherit as a bastard.¹⁷ Law will be undone by lawlessness, order trumped by raw appetite (2.183–5). In larger terms, the principle of abundance/generation that is identical with Nature in the comedies and problem plays is resisted here. The law that in those plays served as a means by which Nature’s generative ends are met is now opposed by a different kind of Nature, one bent on the destruction of order and generation. In a real sense, the “Nature” of the comedies (both festive and problem) is opposed by the “Nature” of this tragedy.¹⁸ But for this “tragic” Nature to triumph over order, she must first defeat reason. Under the right circumstances, however fiercely she may rage at the walls, reason will keep her out. Unless, that is, either reason cracks, or Nature is let inside, willingly; the effect in both instances is chaos.

It is the argument here that the King opens the doors to his own madness and to his consequent destruction. And the way that Lear goes about making this fissure in reason is not by “dwelling” on his daughters’ filial ingratitude, nor in failing the patience he promises to practice, nor even in exposing himself to the physical and mental buffets brought about by his rage, but by scanting knowledge, reason. However, the knowledge meant here is of a particular kind, which Shakespeare makes quite clear. It is knowledge of *himself* in which Lear is deficient. Regan says of him, famously: “yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself” (1.1.294–5). And in failing to observe that foremost of Greek philosophical maxims (ΓΝΩΘΙΣΑΥΤΟΝ – or, in Latin translation, *nosce teipsum* – inscribed on the temple of Apollo at Delphi), Lear lets Nature eat her way out, from the inside.

The interaction between law, madness, sovereignty, and the self, which is analyzed below, springs foremost from the line of scholarship focusing

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16. “Seisen” is the term designating legal possession, and in Renaissance times involved a literal conveyance of some piece of the land – a handful of dirt, for example – to effect transferal. To “seise” someone in this sense is to bring him into rightful ownership. See B.J. Sokol and Mary Sokol, *Shakespeare’s Legal Language* (New Brunswick, NJ.: Althone Press, 2000), 69.
 17. Sokol and Sokol point out that bastardy was not only common in England and throughout Europe, up until the sixteenth century, it was common for bastards to be publicly claimed. And by the Statute of Wills 1540, a legitimate son such as Edward could be disinherited. *Ibid.*, 29. Still, there was no legal way for Edmund, as a bastard, to be made “capable” of the lands as Gloucester promises. Paul S. Clarkson and Clyde T. Warren, *The Law of Property in Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1942), 226.
 18. John Danby posits that the two opposed ideas of Nature are those of Hooker, whose Nature is benign and harmonious, and that of what would later be understood as the Hobbesian idea of Nature, more akin to power and vigor. See generally John F. Danby, *Shakespeare’s Doctrine of Nature: A Study of “King Lear”* (London: Faber & Faber, 1949).

upon the early modern concept of the “self” as integral to culture. Therefore, the works of Charles Taylor and Stephen Greenblatt provide broad contextualization for the discussion that follows. Taylor’s explanation of the “sources” of the self for the early modern up to the time of the Reformation, and the change in this understanding afterward, provides a key to grasping Lear’s “vertigo” on the planes of self-knowledge. In addition, Greenblatt’s concept of “self-fashioning” supports this view in accounting for the false construction Lear has made of his identity. Proceeding from this understanding of the issues involved in “selfhood,” the work of Michel Foucault and Carol Thomas Neely provide further contextualization in the realm of what madness – with its variety of Renaissance forms and aspects – meant culturally, with particular emphasis on drama’s provision of important dichotomies and distinctions. Finally, to these concentric circles of selfhood and madness is added another ring of commentary, that which draws upon sovereignty, the law, and order. The work of Ernst Kantorowicz contributes here. Within the core of these concentric circles of analysis lies what is central to a better understanding of each – a linguistic analysis of stative verbs, and their employment by the playwright as a means to illustrate Lear’s dislocated self. When that self is the sovereign, and the sovereign is seen as the physical manifestation of the polity, the stable placement of that self is crucial to forestalling a chaos that constantly threatens order.

The Greek maxim counseling self-knowledge mentioned above begs the question of what exactly Lear would have “known” if he *had* known himself; what he would have done, in light of that knowledge; and how he would have gone about obtaining it. Charles Taylor argues that the dominant pre-modern understanding of the self acknowledged that some “framework stands unquestioned which helps define the demands by which they [the members of the society] judge their lives and measure, as it were, their fullness or emptiness: the space of fame in the memory and song of the tribe, or the call of God as made clear in revelation, or, to take another example, the hierarchical order of being in the universe.”¹⁹ The modern view, in opposition, questions the “horizon” by which people shared and oriented their existences.²⁰ In other words, to know the self is to know the self in relationship to a particular stance, an identification with a set of answers to a set of questions, and thereby define the self by valuing what is good or what is to be done.²¹ Selves are not possessed in the same sense that we have organs, says Taylor, but we are “only selves insofar as we move in a certain space of questions, as we seek and find an orientation to the good.”²² This necessitates a relationship between the self and a

19. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 16.

20. Taylor says this is the one constant in the modern view – that there is no shared framework is now “*the framework tout court.*” *Ibid.*, 17.

21. *Ibid.*, 27.

22. *Ibid.*, 34.

community of interlocutors, by which and through which the self is known and communicated. The self therefore exists only within what Taylor calls “webs of interlocution.”²³

Stephen Greenblatt’s concept of the “fashioned self” is consistent with Taylor’s understanding, but it focuses upon how the “self” can be constructed vis-à-vis “others” – including both some kind of authority and some kind of alien – in dialectical terms.²⁴ The examples he draws upon in Spenser, Wyatt, More, and Shakespeare, all happen to exemplify fashionings that are more or less self-deceptions; that is, they are only as strong as the conceit. With regard to King Lear, Greenblatt’s view is pertinent, in that the King’s superficial “self” is a construct born of solipsism, of “self”-centeredness. This stems not only from his failure to reside within a “web of interlocution,” but also brings about the dissociation of reason from the self, and sets about his de facto “dethroning.” This self insurrection creates the political insurrection to come. Lear’s lack of self-knowledge isolates him, de-locates him. And since he is the sovereign, the failure has more than local effect. Ontological ignorance with regard to the self leads to a kind of “self-banishment” from the community, resulting in disorientation, and eventually divestment. Tragic Nature lurks to rush in to the disorder.

If the web of interlocution is not maintained – is cut, in fact, by the sovereign – the sovereign removes himself from the interpretive community, and madness becomes the metaphor for the naturalistic chaos that follows. The point here is that the governor’s sense of self is even more closely tied to the welfare of the state than is often realized; whence it goes, so goes the kingdom. In other words, the “philosopher king” is not an ideal, but a necessity.

Lear was “ignorant of himself,” as Regan says, before he was mad. Had he existed within the interpretive community, he would have presumably learned not what a pagan British chieftain would have known, nor even a Greek philosopher, but what the playwright’s community considered at the root of the personhood.²⁵ Sidney best articulates the Renaissance “self,”

23. *Ibid.*, 36.

24. Stephan Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 9.

25. Paul Jorgensen’s mid-twentieth century work chronicles scholarly opinion on what “knowing the self” meant. He does so from the related perspective of self-discovery rather than self-knowledge; his aim is an explanation of dramatic *agnorisis* (i.e., “recognition”), while the intention here is ontological essence. Paul A. Jorgensen, *Lear’s Self-Discovery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 2. By and large, Jorgensen says self-knowledge was the basic wisdom essential to right conduct, and the ability to distinguish one’s limitations (i.e., humility), thereby guarding against what is evil. *Ibid.*, 4. Historically, most critics consider a character’s realization that “a mistake has been made” as equivalent to self-discovery. *Ibid.*, 6. Likewise, contrary to the view expressed here, most critics find Lear to have obtained that knowledge, however imperfectly, by the end of the play. *Ibid.*, 107; Bennett, *The Madness of Lear*, 153; Manfred Weidhorn, “Lear’s Schoolmasters,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (1962): 313; Robert B. Heilman, “Twere Best not Know myself: Othello, Lear, Macbeth,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (1964): 94. A proponent for an opposite view is that of Warren Taylor, who claims that Lear’s self remains lost to him. Warren Taylor, “Lear and the Lost Self,” *College*

and reveals it to be a dishonored core whose “erected wit” (i.e., “reason”) is subject to the “infected will” (i.e., appetite) by virtue of its fall from grace.²⁶ And unless this reality is acknowledged, fully, the wit can never master the will. Even with a clear understanding of this self-knowledge, the struggle to gain the upper hand over the appetite is never-ending and arduous.²⁷ It requires concessions be made to one’s faults and inabilities. Otherwise, the ground of the self from which all judgments rise will not be truly known, and hence no judgments properly made, since not arising from right reason. And if not made from right reason, then all judgments are accidental, and only await the proper set of circumstances for catastrophe to follow from mistake. But “reason” and its relationship to concepts of the “self” have a complicated history, one that grew particularly complex in the sixteenth century.

Foucault’s work on the history of insanity explains one dimension of the malady that is particularly relevant here. The mad, like the leprous, were considered fearful and scorn-worthy from the early perspective, but they also retained an aura of the supernatural about them. The visitation of the scourge could be seen as the gift of suffering, a mortal badge of soul-sickness, obtaining for the sufferer a kind of white martyrdom, as it were.²⁸ This may in some way rise from another Renaissance idea that Foucault considers – the “madness of the cross.” The great irrational sacrifice of God for man – the scandal of the cross, as it is known – rebuked man’s pride. But this metaphor was gradually changed. “When classical Christianity speaks of the madness of the cross, it is merely to humiliate false reason and add luster to the eternal light of truth,” says Foucault.²⁹ The sanctified was sanitized, converted into a respectable point in apologetics. Further, Carol Thomas Neely’s work explains how derangement shifted from being perceived as a state part demonic, part divine, part human in nature, to a kind of demystified phenomenon. Drama’s encoding of certain language – through inflection, italicization, marking – provided the audience with a

English 25, no. 7 (1964): 509–13. While I agree with his conclusion, Taylor’s focus is on “self” in the sense of the “kind of man Lear could have been but was not,” that is, the depth of soul, perspicacity of vision, etc., his character could have risen to, but never did. Again, that kind of “self” is not ontological, and therefore not the focus here. Another view, complementary to mine and Taylor’s but from a different angle, is that of David Collington, who says Lear fails in practicing what Montaigne calls “Solitarinesse.” David P. Collington, “Self-Discovery in Montaigne’s ‘Of Solitarinesse’ and *King Lear*,” *Comparative Drama* 35, no. 3 (2001): 247–69. Carol Thomas Neely makes the same point as is made here: the state is too dislocated for the resolution suggested by these readings. Neely, *Distracted Subjects*, 64 n. 25.

26. Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defense of Poesy*, ed. Albert S. Cook (Boston: Ginn, 1890), 8–9.

27. See Augustine, “Of Nature and Grace: Against Pelagius,” in *The Anti-Pelagian Works of St. Augustine*, trans. Peter Holmes (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1872), 253–6. Augustine draws upon St. Paul’s lament over the belligerence of the carnal state despite all rationality. *Ibid.*, 282. A recent work contends that Shakespeare’s poetics draws upon Augustine. Lisa Freinkel, *Reading Shakespeare’s Will* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

28. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Pantheon, 1965).

29. *Ibid.*, 78.

means to make cultural distinctions.³⁰ In the case of Lear, Neely says, “the supernatural explanations [of madness] are completely abandoned since Lear suffers from natural madness and the supernatural possession that Edgar assumes in his role as Poor Tom is explicitly feigned.”³¹ Exorcism becomes unnecessary when the altered state can be addressed by a “cure.”

The change in the perceptions of madness that Foucault speaks of, and the abandonment of the supernatural that Neely explains, are consistent with the Reformational shift regarding the “good life” that Charles Taylor identifies. The amendment of evaluative mechanisms to exclude what lies outside the “ordinary world” is consistent with the Reformational hallowing of the immediate – the “here and now.” Reflective states, contemplative enquiries, become highly suspicious, even selfish, as they focus on the good of the self rather than that of the multitude. They provide nothing practical for the common welfare.³² It is likely they were also considered to smack of monasticism, and from the Reformer’s perspective, the worst type of monasticism – the cloister.³³

Taylor traces this change to Augustine.³⁴ The inwardness that Augustine advocated as a means to know the self in relation to God is subtly changed over time: rather than move the gaze from the outside to the inside, thereby finding a way to God; the Reformer also moves the eyes from the “higher” life, the contemplative, to the ordinary life of practical, lived experience. The sifting of one’s soul is done not to achieve ever greater communion with God, but to live a better, more productive life here on earth. Since for the Reformer all are depraved and none can come closer to God by his own merits or achievements, and since God’s grace alone provides for salvation, reflective spirituality is increasingly marginal.³⁵ For purposes of the argument here, the history that Foucault, Neely, and Taylor explain sets up a trajectory that excludes from the “rational” and “reasonable” anything that is speculative, reflective, mystical. The use of “reason” to oppose the chaos of raw nature no longer includes all the “sources” of the self, as Taylor would have it, that were previously available; as such, these sources shrink to consist of only the purely “practical,” a forerunner to what will later become the strict scientific view. Ironically, this shrunken “landscape” is also consistent with a materialist, solipsistic view, which is concerned with the immediate and appetitive, and will be satisfied despite conflicting realities. This is Lear’s dilemma. He has not availed himself of the interpretive community, and therefore has fashioned himself as the center of existence; he centers upon himself, never seeking the center *within* himself.

30. Neely, *Distracted Subjects*, 23.

31. *Ibid.*, 59.

32. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 104.

33. *Ibid.* 185; 216–7.

34. *Ibid.*, 129.

35. Eventually, says Taylor, the religious context is supplanted altogether by modern utilitarian and materialist ideologies. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 13.

However Augustine was understood or misunderstood by the Reformers, he is a catalyst and pivotal point in ways of knowing. For Augustine, “the outer is the bodily, what we have in common with the beasts, including even our senses, and the memory storage of our images of outer things. The inner is the soul. . . .” Said Augustine, “Do not go outward; return within yourself. In the inward man dwells truth.”³⁶ Most importantly, says Taylor, “Augustine shifts the focus from the field of objects known to the activity itself of knowing; God is to be found there. This begins to account for his use of the language of inwardness. For in contrast to the domain of objects, which is public and common, the activity of knowing is particularized; each of us is engaged in ours. To look towards this activity is to look to the self, to take up a reflexive stance.”³⁷ As a result, the language of inwardness marks the discourse as reflective—as focused on *comprehension*, not mere *apprehension*.

The very language of “knowing” used in *King Lear* supports the conclusion that self-knowledge is integral to the forestalling of an all-too-ready chaos. In the context of the sovereign – the lawgiver and caretaker – linguistic evidence of the lack of that self-knowledge presages the fracture of the kingdom. In short, language highlights the epistemological dynamics in the “way to Lear’s madness,” and of paramount importance is the use of the verb “know.”³⁸

Linguists explain that one type of stative verb, i.e., verbs that express an unchanging state or condition, is that which conveys a private state. These states can only be subjectively verified.³⁹ Among this group are intellectual states, such as “know,” “believe,” “wonder,” etc. Only *we* can honestly judge whether we know something or not, only *we* can look into the interior of ourselves, clearly, to consult that cache of things we call knowledge. Foremost among that cache is *what* we are. Consequently, the truth that what a person “knows” can only be subjectively verified is joined by an attendant truth: what others may “know” of us, of our true “selves” – i.e. . . ., what *they* know of what *we* know – comes only through what we reveal. This interior is communicated only through verbs that express the private intellectual state – what I term “portal” verbs. These are words through which we express our knowledge of our selves. In addition, if we know

36. *Ibid.*, 129.

37. *Ibid.*, 130.

38. Just as the unities become exponential in the multiple marriages of the problem plays and festive comedies, the disunities become exponential here. But rather as metaphoric separations, one becoming two, this disunity should be seen as metaphoric death – one dividing, then dying; every separation in *King Lear* leads to death. The scene most symbolic of this death spiral reduction is 2.2, in which the daughters who began the play vying to express their inexpressible love for their father turn and vie to diminish his retinue:

GONERIL. What need you five and twenty? Ten? Or Five? (2.2.450).

REGAN. What need one? (2.2.453).

In essence, since Lear sees his men as vestiges of himself, Regan and Goneril divide and waste the King, just as he has done his kingdom.

39. Randolph Quirk et al., *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (New York: Longman, 1985), 202–03.

ourselves – *what* we are – we can use ourselves as epistemological tools by which to rightly know *what* other things are, to gather into ourselves a right understanding that enriches the cache of what is known. The meaning of the pronoun is key, because ontologies are based in “*what*-ness,” not in “*who*-ness” – i.e., in essence, not in appearance. Indeed, to *re*-cognize something truly, we must first *know* (*cognoscere*) it truly, remember it from a first understanding of its essence. The failure to know substances can compromise the ability to distinguish forms and can lead to a world filled with phantasms. Only in probing inwardly, “looking” sightlessly for that which is beyond sight – the self – can we learn how to see beyond that which presents itself to the eye; only then do we know *what* to look for.

In his use of the portal verb “know,”⁴⁰ Lear reveals that he has no knowledge of *what* things are, and as a result even begins to question *who* they are. In contrast to those who both truly “see” real essences – Kent and Cordelia – his use of “know” is most often in the sense of “recognition” of something or someone, and never in the strict sense of an “appreciation” of its essence.

Know that we have divided In three our kingdom (1.1.35). (emphasis mine)

Dost thou *know* me, fellow? (1.4.26). (emphasis mine)

Doth any here *know* me? (1.4.216). (emphasis mine)

I *know* thee well enough; thy name is Gloucester (4.6.173). (emphasis mine)

I am a king,

My masters, *know* you that (4.6.196). (emphasis mine)

He seldom moves beyond recognizing the form to understanding the essence, and when he does, he is most often wrong:

[to Cordelia] You are a spirit, I *know*: when did you die? (4.7.49) (emphasis mine)

[to Cordelia] If you have poison for me, I will drink it. / I *know* you do not love me (4.7.73). (emphasis mine)

His usage of the word becomes more and more tentative, until it confesses only a lack of knowledge, a lack of understanding:

I will have such revenges on you both,

40. The verb has many aspects, including the familiar sense of “recognition” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2006 ed., s.v. “know” 1.1.b) and to have cognizance through observation and inquiry (Oxford English Dictionary, 2006 ed., s.v. “know” III.8). But the end of the fifteenth century brings the last recorded appearances of the verb in the transitive sense of “to confess, own, or admit” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2006 ed., s.v. “know” 3.a.) and “to confess oneself to *be something*.” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2006 ed., s.v. “know” 3.b.).

That all the world shall – I will do such things, –
 What they are, yet I *know* not (2.2.470). (emphasis mine)
 I *know* not what to say (4.7.54). (emphasis mine)
 [N]or I *know* not
 Where I did lodge last night (4.7.67). (emphasis mine)

His only use of the term in the strict sense, an appreciation of the essence of things, is in terms of death. And even here, Lear shrinks from reality. He immediately forsakes what he truly “knows” and instead embraces the fantasy that Cordelia lives yet:

I *know* when one is dead, and when one lives;
 She’s dead as earth. Lend me a looking-glass;
 If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,
 Why, then she lives (5.3.258–60). (emphasis mine)

Gloucester, his fellow in ontological ignorance, uses the word in the same facile way of recognition:

Do you *know* this noble gentleman, Edmund? (1.1.24) (emphasis mine)
 You *know* the character to be your brother’s? (1.2.62). (emphasis mine)
 Dost thou *know* Dover? (4.1.74). (emphasis mine)
 [of Lear] I *know* that voice (4.6.95). (emphasis mine)
 [to Lear] Dost thou *know* me? (4.6.131). (emphasis mine)

He does not “know” the *character* of his legitimate son Edgar, nor the true character of his bastard son Edmund, taking even that word in its literal sense, handwriting, rather than its figural and ontological sense. When blind, Gloucester asks only if the mad Lear recognizes him; Lear can satisfy him in that sense, as the King’s eyes are not out, though his reason has long dimmed. Again, like Lear, Gloucester’s usage is often in terms of a confession as to what he does not know:

I *know* not why he comes (2.1.79). (emphasis mine)
 I *know* not, madam: ‘tis too bad, too bad (2.1.96). (emphasis mine)
 He calls to horse; but will I *know* not whither (2.2.487). (emphasis mine)

This failure to “know” unsettles even the ability to recognize. Lear begins to question what he sees and is tentative in his responses to what he has previously assumed. “Are you our daughter?” he asks Goneril upon her refusal of him (1.4.209) “Regan, I think you are,” says Lear, about to suffer his second rebuff (2.2.315); and “I think this lady; To be my child Cordelia,” (4.7.68) he says, after his rescue. He even loses knowledge of his own identity: “Who is it that can tell me who I am? (1.4.221)” Of course, this is perhaps the most profound example of how wrong his inquiries are.

Lear asks *who* he is, not *what* he is. Like the Fisher King of Arthurian legend, the kingdom cannot be cured until the right question is put to the sovereign. But here Lear himself does not know what to ask. The Fool's answer to his question – “Lear's shadow” (1.4.222) – drives home the point in Platonic terms: the depth of his “unreality” – the shadow, not the substance. Lear's own essence is hidden to him.

A few characters use the terms in the strict ontological sense, knowing “essences.” Predictably, they include the banished retainer, Kent:

[of Edmund] I must love you, and sue to *know* you better [know *what* you are] (1.1.29). (emphasis mine)

[of the perfidious Oswald] I *know* thee. [I know *what* you are] (2.2.12). (emphasis mine)

[of himself] To go out of my dialect, which you discommend so much. I *know*, sir, I am no flatterer [that is not *what* I am] (2.2.108). (emphasis mine)

[of a trustworthy knight] Sir, I *know* you. Where's the king? [knows *what* he is: trustworthy] (3.1.3). (emphasis mine)

The knight, challenging the secrecy of dealing with a disguised man, demands to know *who* Kent is. Kent answers that soon he will learn what he desires to know, and will be put at ease because he knows *what* Kent is. Indeed, he is a man whose essence is so well known that he must disguise it; he cannot let the others know *who* he is because they know *what* he is – loyal to Lear.

In addition, Cordelia, the repository of true worth, speaks the word first in its ontological sense. Upon her own banishment, she says of her duplicitous sisters:

I *know* you *what* you are,
And like a sister am most loath to call
Your faults as they are named (1.1.271–2). (emphasis mine)

Finally, to Kent and Cordelia is added Edgar, who says “I know thee well” (4.6.255) to Oswald, in the sense that he knows him for what he is—a scoundrel; and even more to the point: “to know our enemies minds, we'd rip their hearts” (4.6.255). But tellingly, the term is also used in the ontological sense by Goneril, and her doing so makes a point about the use of knowledge itself, even self-knowledge. When Lear storms away, having been refused his knights, Goneril sends her lackey Oswald ahead to Regan, to prepare her as a confederate. She does so because she “knows” Lear's heart (1.4.324), i.e., what he desires and intends. And this is because she knows her own. What Lear desires is the retention of his position and power; he will seek it in another place if he cannot find it in this. His desires are something of which she has full understanding. That Goneril has seen her own intentions and recognizes them in Lear exemplifies the fact that to know one's vices is not necessarily to reform them. Instead, they may be embraced, as in her case.

Taylor points out that from Augustine's standpoint, "the perversity in the will can never be sufficiently explained by our lack of insight into the good; on the contrary, it makes us act below and against our insight, and prevents this from becoming fuller and purer. This perversity can be described as a drive to make ourselves the centre of our world, to relate everything to ourselves, to dominate and possess the things which surround us."⁴¹ And again, most importantly, with regard to the search for self-knowledge, Augustine was of the view that the soul can fail in the quest. The failure can stem from a confusion of even knowing where to begin, what to look for – a Meno's paradox.⁴²

To put it differently, the moral accounting that self-knowledge should bring need not be undertaken. One might know what one is, as Edmund does, and indulge what one is, rather than try to reform it. Similarly, Edmund uses his "wits" to gain Edgar's "lands" by subversion. Though Lear scants reason and as a result loses his lands, Edmund is an example of the forceful application of reason, working in complicity with the will, in order to achieve a bad end.

In an interesting editorial guessing-game, one line is attributed to both Edmund and Goneril, the former in the folio edition and the latter in the quarto.⁴³ At the play's end, when confronted with the sedition that has been wrought, one of them says: "Ask me not what I *know*," a refusal to have anything demanded of him/her, a refusal to look inside the self for knowledge. For the Elizabethan, a refusal to take a self-accounting, particularly one made at the last, when the final judgment is about to be made, is the worst thing imaginable. Contrition for *what* one is must exist before absolution can be given. If the line is spoken by Goneril, who is about to become a suicide, she is reminiscent of Iago, unrepentant to the end. It is less satisfying if spoken by Edmund, who is in the end somewhat converted by hearing the tale of his father's death, and of his brother's compassion towards him: "Some good I mean to do/ Despite of mine own nature" (5.3.241–2). It seems, at the last, Edmund looks inside.

Even in Lear's brief respite from lunacy, when he and Cordelia are carried away to prison, he shows that he only apprehends the meanings, but does not truly comprehend them. They are "caught" but not understood. His world comes to mean Cordelia, whom he "catches" right before her death (5.3.21), but he does not fully understand her still. When she demands to confront her sisters, who have imprisoned them, Lear will not allow it:

No, no, no, no! Come, let's away to prison:
 We two alone will sing like birds I' the cage:
 When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,

41. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 138–9.

42. *Ibid.*, 134.

43. Foakes gives the line to Edmund, stating that Goneril has already shown she knows of the paper that is proof of her seditious compact. *King Lear* (Foakes), 377.

And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live,
 And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
 At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
 Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too –
 Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out –
 And take upon's the mystery of things,
 As if we were God's spies. And we'll wear out,
 In a wall'd prison packs and sects of great ones,
 That ebb and flow by the moon (5.3.8–19).

However beautiful his speech, Cordelia cannot be Lear's private universe. In light of what they face, what he proposes is surely an unrealistic flight of fancy that could even be called inappropriate were it not so lovely, and so long looked for in his appreciation of Cordelia. We so want to hear this said to her, and for him to *know* something of her value, that we overlook the fact that what he speaks of is another dream. Before, he has banished her from his entire world, which has led to a chaos that cannot be mended by his making her into his entire world. Lear goes from excess to excess. He is not temperate, patient, which he asks again and again to be.⁴⁴ In the end, rather than confront what he must, *know* what he must, he refuses to *know* at all, four times – “No, no, no, no!”

And what is it that he refuses to confront? That which he had thought was the “way to madness,” his daughters, Goneril and Regan, joint rulers of the disintegrating realm. In not confronting them who are said to “know his heart” (1.4.324) and who appreciate that he does not “know himself” (1.1.295), he refuses to face a mirror of misrule, one he has fashioned by his own hands. The irony is that only in so doing will he truly know himself. Contrary to what Lear is afraid of, in *that* way madness does *not* lie. And by refusing this self-confrontation, he ensures the destruction of all.

Of course, an ordinary person *may* function very well without “knowing” himself in the Elizabethan sense, never endangering property or person, nor risking certification for madness despite his ontological ignorance. But the play suggests that the greater the person, the more invested with position and authority, the more damaging such an ignorance may be. And that is especially so for figures in Renaissance plays, particularly so in Shakespearean tragedies, acutely so when a King. As Duncan Salkeld explains, “[T]he insane in Renaissance tragedy were not merely victims of a brutal society; they were also violent, murderous and politically dangerous.”⁴⁵ For a commonplace of medieval and Renaissance thought was that the King *was* the kingdom, and disorder in the sovereign corresponded to

44. Taylor says “[Lear] still has a sense that dutiful daughters should pamper old fathers; this time, the right one will.” Taylor, “Lear and the Lost Self,” 512.

45. Salkeld, *Madness and Drama*, 80.

disorder in the realm.⁴⁶ Here, King Lear has brought that disorder on both himself and his kingdom. In a real sense, for the Elizabethan, a failure to know the self is a failure to know the realm; the failure to know *what* he is jeopardizes his ability to rule justly, his capacity to judge correctly.

By way of an opposite example, Duke Vincentio in *Measure for Measure* is instructive. For most of the play, the Duke, disguised as a friar, spies upon his own kingdom. He does so in order to learn more of it. It is a knowledge he has not acquainted himself with before, as he has lived a life removed, cloistered away from his realm. The result of his *de facto* abdication of responsibilities has been the ruin of Vienna, and has brought about the misrule of his martinet deputy, Angelo. Only when the Duke learns of his kingdom can he leave the “dark corners” of himself and remount the throne. As his trusted retainer Escalus says of him, he is “one that, above all other strifes, contended especially to *know* himself (3.2.226)” (emphasis mine). His role as judge and governor is affirmed in his manifesto, given in monologue. Central to it is the idea of the self as a base from which to make judgments:

He who the sword of heaven will bear
Should be as holy as severe;
Pattern in himself to know,
Grace to stand, and virtue go;
More nor less to others paying
Than by self-offences weighing.
(3.2.254–9) (emphasis mine)⁴⁷

This is precisely what Lear has not done and never learns to do. In fact, Lear’s failure to know himself compromises his ability to know others, and in the end, his ability to know anything at all. The breadth of this statement is considerable, but justified, since the “self” is the staging ground for all epistemological enquiry. Each self is the sole epistemological tool by which knowledge can be gained. Our “selves” are all we have. Without an awareness of how strong that tool is, and more importantly, how weak (it would seem we know our strengths better than our weaknesses, as the former are more gladly faced) decisions, choices, and assessments about the world will be made from a false standing.

Stability and order are tied to self-knowledge, a correlation suited to Shakespeare’s dramatic purposes. Without an ontological self awareness, a person – particularly a person of power – cannot judge or know other ontologies. Hamlet admits the connection when he says “to know a man were to know himself.” (5.2.138). The *very* means by which determinations

46. See generally Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1957).

47. Lever notes that the rhyming scheme here denotes a certain hieratic style. *Measure for Measure* (Lever), n. 254. Prospero adopts it in his soliloquies in *The Tempest*. *Ibid.*

are made, of others, of the larger world, is compromised when there is nothing – no self – to judge against; as Lear says to Cordelia, with Oedipal irony, “Nothing” comes “of nothing” (1.1.90). All the King has as a base for judgment is himself, and without that orientation, he cannot judge anything rightly. Even a flimsy, faulty basis *is* a basis, and adjustments can be made if the King knows where he stands. Without that, he is all at sea; worse, he is under it, and lost as to which way the surface lies.

Judgment born of self-knowledge is the perspective of the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, and the one that prepares him not only to judge the cases brought before him at the play’s close, but to govern his kingdom rightly and to seek its health. If the sovereign knows himself, he knows how to measure the world. Lear, on the other hand, has no idea how to measure or distinguish, because he has no base “self” from which to measure. He equates things that cannot be equated, distinguishes things that are not necessarily different: that bonds of flesh are not necessarily bonds of love; that words are not deeds (though Regan speaks of them as though they are – “She [Goneril] names my very deed of love” [1.1.56])⁴⁸; that silence is not perforce denial; that something cannot forsake its place and retain the attributes of its place (i.e., a former king does not enjoy the prerogatives of a reigning king).

Lear’s greatest mistake is the first one the audience sees, the “love trial.” In this, Lear performs a monumental perversion of the law. He does so by using one of its mechanisms, meant to ferret out transgressions against the civil society and thereby preserve its goods, as the means by which to test that which lies at the very heart of all human goods, love.⁴⁹ The tribunal is made the rack upon which love is tried, and it is fundamentally unfit for the task. Lear’s tribunal asks what love *is*, an ontological inquiry of the highest order. But as the love test shows, he is not actually interested in ontologies, but in word games, the appearance of love, not the substance. In contrast, Cordelia’s first words are ontological in nature: “*What shall Cordelia speak?*” (1.1.62) (emphasis mine). The absurdity of this event is only matched by its execution, as Lear is supremely unprepared to make the proper judgment. Gloucester and Kent begin the play perplexed as to the “measurement” that the King will make in his division of the land (1.1.5). For his part, Lear perseveres in his “constant will” to publish his

48. Foakes points out that the term also has the contractual connotation. *King Lear* (Foakes), 162 n. 71. The irony of the statement lies in the fact that there is a disjunction between the *res* and the *verba*, the breach in meaning that creates a lie. See Harmon, *Eternal Bonds, True Contracts*, 32, 145.

49. To the classical mind, goods were comparative: those which are good in and of themselves (*honestum*); those which are productive of good (*utile*) and those which are preservative of good. Cicero borrows from Aristotle’s model in the *Rhetorica* in elaborating upon these goods. Cicero, *De Inventione*, ed. H.M. Hubbell (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1949), 2.157. That model taken in conjunction with the theological virtues (faith, hope, and love) would place love, “the greatest of these” according to the New Testament, 1 Cor. 13:13, at the top of “goods in themselves.” Charles Taylor characterizes these as “hypergoods.” Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 63.

daughters' inheritance, and sets before them the famous trial. But love is not "proved" by rhetoric, and Lear is unaware of that fact.⁵⁰ Sound judges, of old and of late, demand proof, first-hand accountings, not empty hearsay and puffery; yet Lear is content with the latter. This is so because he has no knowledge of his weaknesses – how prone he is to flattery – and as such cannot defense against it. As a result, he chooses what is pleasing to hear rather than what is possible to know. His vanity is an easy mark for his eldest daughters to hit, and is matched by his irrational wrath, which proceeds "dragon"-like until spent in dispossessing Cordelia (1.1.122). Appetitive metaphors abound. Barbarians and those who "gorge" their "appetites" with their own children will be more welcome to his bosom than she (1.1.119); he even tells Cornwall and Albany to "digest" her "portion" of the kingdom (1.1.129), revealing much of how he conceptualizes the realm.

Susceptible to both flattery and wrath, his misjudgment in the "trial" has consequences, grave and great. There is even a sense in which the king here is anarchist. He divides the realm and disinherits the one heir who is worthy. To have sliced up the kingdom would alone be considered shocking and unwise, but to divide a house between corrupt sovereigns, Regan and Goneril, and to banish the only hope of the land, Cordelia, is to work the destruction of all.⁵¹ There is something anti-Solomonic in this division, a judge who madly insists on the division of the corpus despite what such an act will effectuate. This is a primary offense in the sovereign/judge, to lay waste to that which he holds as trustee; it is doubly committed in the sense that Lear – who it must be remembered *is* Britain – "wastes" himself, dividing his crown in two, and separating his wit from his will.

In this one act, Lear both distorts the mechanism of law, making it a means to test society's greatest end, love, and also commits a travesty of epistemological enquiry. This initiates the crisis in sovereignty that unfolds. Lear does not know how to discern love because he does not know how to judge; he cannot judge because he has no basis from which to "see" rightly, to compare and to measure, as Kent so adamantly advises him: "See better, Lear, and let me still remain the true blank of thine eye" (1.1.159–60). In

50. Interestingly, in the courtly tradition, the great trials of love tend to be physical feats, tasks, or deeds – conquering some foe, breaking some spell, obtaining some artifact – not poetry contests. See Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*, trans. John Jay Parry 34–43 (New York: Frederick Unger, 1957). In matters of "higher" love, the same proves true. Sir Galahad could attain the Holy Grail because of his deed-proven purity. Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, ed. Janet Cowen (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969), vol. 2: bk. 17, chaps. 20, 22. Edgar proves his own worth in a trial by combat at the end of the play. Dorothy C. Hockey, "The Trial Pattern in *King Lear*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (1959): 393. The attempt to try love is not unlike the attempt to try faith by the Court of High Commission, which used drastic measures to ensure religious conformity with the Church of England. See Brian Cummings, "Swearing in Public: More and Shakespeare," *ELH*, 27 (1997) 107–233.

51. *King Lear* (Foakes), 17. Salkeld notes the similarities to the Renaissance revenge tragedy *Gorboduc*, written by Norton and Sackville. Salkeld, *Madness and Drama*, 82–6. There, the King divides the kingdom equally among his sons despite being warned that "within one land, one rule is best; divided reigns do make divided hearts." *Ibid.*, 83. But the answer is ignored, and civil war ensues. *Ibid.*, 84.

essence, Kent is offering himself as a benchmark, a means for checking the accuracy of the King's perspective. This is necessary to prevent decisions made in the blindness of wrath. But reason is banished here, and Lear proceeds, indulging his appetite. The two characters that see rightly, who know things, are sent away: Kent and Cordelia. In so doing, the King creates the breach in order by which his sanity will be lost, and through which raw, rapacious Nature will rush; this is her moment, and in the very next scene Edmund, the illegitimate, heralds her arrival: "Thou, Nature, art my Goddess" (1.2.1).

In other plays, a different kind of Nature has agents that help her effect her purposes. As has been mentioned, in the problem plays, festive comedies, and romances, Nature as the principle of abundance seeks to bring forth conjunction, the furtherance of a healthy society through production and generation – marriage and children.⁵² Here too, in *King Lear*, tragic Nature – the principle of appetite – has her agents, those who bring her into full power through the fissure in reason Lear has wrought. Certainly, the most obvious of these is Edmund, who shows his allegiance early, and acts in most ways as a medieval vice figure.⁵³ But though the most apparent, he is not the most prominent. Both Lear and Gloucester, traitors to themselves and to the kingdom, indulge "natural" habits opposed to reason – Gloucester's flip incontinence, Lear's vanity and wrath – that reflect the disorder to which they have brought themselves. Having scanted self-knowledge, their natural selves are left to "grow and prosper," as Edmund would have it, and finally find physical manifestation. Gloucester's internal "blindness" results in the dispossession of his "lawful" son in preference to his "natural son." In the end, his inability to "see" becomes as literally true as it has been metaphorically. Nature breaks into the world from the inside, through Gloucester's lusty eyes.

Likewise, Lear's disordered mind is only a later manifestation of the irrationality he exhibits from the play's beginning. F. David Hoeniger has pointed out that an Elizabethan audience would understand Lear's rash decision, which provokes civil war by dividing the kingdom, as symptomatic of madness. Wrath was seen as a type of madness, *brevis furor*, in which reason was temporarily suspended altogether. The King's dispossession of his only worthy heir would confirm the diagnosis.⁵⁴ Lear's "mad"

52. Characters such as Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*, Diana in *All's Well That Ends Well*, and the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, work to bring together reluctant lovers to save their sick and dying societies. Harmon, *Eternal Bonds, True Contracts*, 157. An example of agent opposed to Nature, and therefore an agent of the will/lust/appetite, is Pandarus in *Troilus and Cressida*. *Ibid.*, 145–6.

53. *Measure for Measure* (Lever), 179.

54. F. David Hoeniger, *Medicine and Shakespeare in the English Renaissance* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1992), 310. Hoeniger quotes from Penelope Doob's work, *Nebuchadnezzar's Children*: "When yielding to anger (*ira*), we commit a sin, for we are obeying the promptings of a dangerous passion of the lower part of our Nature instead of the divine gift of reason. Passion overthrows reason and madness results. The medieval attitude was that 'habitual anger is madness, it is not simply like madness.'" *Ibid.*, 313.

trial of the imaginary Goneril and Regan in 3.6 is only a subsequent underscoring of his irrationality in the opening love trial. His daughters are no more truly “there” in the chambers of Tom’s hovel – presided over by a fool, a madman, and a servant – than their true selves were “there” when they spoke vain words to a foolish judge, Lear himself.⁵⁵ In this context, the legitimacy of Lear’s “will” at the play’s inception is all the more problematic. Under traditional English law, an “idiot,” i.e., one completely bereft of his reasoning, could not bequeath, as he had lost the faculty of right judgment; however, a “lunatic” could make a will during a period of lucidity.⁵⁶ As Adrian Lockhart says, “Lear himself is the false justicer who let his daughter escape.”⁵⁷ In the love trial, he has contented himself with lies about what love is; now, in the mad trial, he vainly prosecutes those that he had found in the “right.” He is caught in his own judgment.

Lear’s is a long, waking madness, and the audience only enters upon the first of the last, the beginning of his final descent. Gloucester has always been blind; Lear, always mad; tragic Nature breaches the physical borders after all other known borders have already been transgressed – legal, political, and familial. By slighting knowledge at its first and primary level of enquiry, the self, Lear destroys the safeguard protecting the kingdom from disorder. He in fact introduces that disorder through the breach that gives Nature license, bringing about a breathtaking dissolution both in his mind and in his kingdom. At every level there is a cleavage in the institutional borders – law, nation, family – that are meant to protect and further the society. The first dispersal is in twain, but from then on the divisions are exponential: Lear from Cordelia, Lear from Kent, Regan and Goneril from Cordelia, Edmund from Edgar, Gloucester from Edgar, Edmund from Gloucester, Goneril from Lear, Cornwall from Albany, Regan from Lear, Regan and Cornwall from Kent, Regan and Cornwall from Gloucester, Regan from Goneril, Goneril from Albany, Edmund from Lear and Cordelia, England from France.

Lear’s perversion of law, so that it becomes love’s rack, is a failure to appreciate law’s proper use and its built-in limits. Again, this is only a visible exhibition of an innate irrationality – or better yet, an *arationality* – that flows from his rejection of self-enquiry in favor of pure will/appetite. He cannot know other things, or judge other things, because he has no basis from which to make those judgments, no acquaintance with his true self and his diminished capacities. Through his resulting perversion of the law, tragic Nature rushes, disordering all. That Lear’s sanity is among the first to sustain the blow is not surprising, as it is the portal through which the enemy has made its way.

(quoting Penelope Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar’s Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 29). This argument is support for the dramatic marking in Renaissance plays to which Carol Thomas Neely alludes.

55. See Hockey, “Trial Pattern in *King Lear*,” 389–95; Andrienne Lockhart, “The Cat is Grey: *King Lear*’s Mad Trial Scene,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (1975): 469–71.

56. George Dale Collinson, *A Treatise on the Law Concerning Idiots, Lunatics, and Other Persons Non Composites Mentis* (London: W. Reed, 1812), 612.

57. Lockhart, “The Cat is Grey,” 471.

Knowledge, especially self-knowledge, is often painful. Goneril even tells Albany that he should not “afflict” himself to know the reason for her behavior (1.4.283). As a result, self-knowledge is customarily avoided; it is easier to live with the illusion. One thing that Lear avoids seeing is the picture of corrupt rule that he has made, the mirror that his reigning daughters would present to him if he were to stand in their presence.⁵⁸ But further yet, beyond this first interior view lies another, one that Lear does in fact confront, but characteristically turns from.

It occurs on the heath, just after he has stated, mistakenly, that he will avoid the way to madness by refusing to dwell on his misfortunes. As the wind blows and the thunder strikes, Edgar emerges as Poor Tom – dispossessed, maligned, reduced to nothing. In this, Tom is both essential man, and essential world – what Lear has brought himself to, and what he has brought his world to. He has taken “care” of neither, the foremost responsibility of the sovereign. And from this, Lear’s mind turns completely; he projects his own suffering onto Tom, and Tom’s suffering not onto Tom, but onto Tom’s daughters. Lear falls to madness rather than rise to understanding, and ends up in the very place – fulminating at filial ingratitude – that he had so feared.

It is Edgar who stands at the heart of Lear’s being, and Edgar who confesses a knowledge of self that Lear never comes to, in fact runs from: “*Know*, my name is lost.” (5.3.121) (emphasis mine). His birthright has been stolen from him, his identity robbed, and all that he has, taken. He has had to pretend madness to disguise himself amid the chaos, to survive a world gone mad. His is the plight of fallen man, soiled, dispossessed, reduced to a “bare forked animal.” At the nadir of self, Edgar’s way back is torturous, a bloody struggle against bare-fanged Nature, whom he must finally vanquish in the form of her agent, his brother Edmund. Edgar’s personal fight for “being” becomes an emblem for all contests between wit and will. His agony goes the core of his “self,” and is achieved with great ceremony, a ritual of reclamation as mystical as it is formal.

Edgar as wretch is precisely what Lear *must* see. Instead, the King’s wits turn at the sight, and bring him phantoms with which he is more comfortable – rages against the injustices done him. In this, the law-giver, the judge and safeguard of the realm, accedes to the transgresses of tragic Nature, and reveals the “way” that the law must avoid. It must stand with reason to protect the good, not become the means by which the will has its say. In that tragic event, the law is owned, part and parcel, by the appetite. Eventually, the appetite will make its claim in the fashion of Lear’s chosen heir: “the laws are mine . . . who can arraign me for’t?” (5.3.156) In such a claim, Nature lurks; in such a claim, tragedy awaits.

58. The commonplace book meant to caution monarchs by showing them their fault-filled predecessors was William Baldwin, *A Mirror for Magistrates*, ed. Lily B. Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938).

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