

# EVERY TURN OF THE WHEEL: CIRCULAR TIME AND CORDELIA'S REVOLT: FROM WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE TO THE BRITISH ENLIGHTENMENT

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## Abstract

This article argues that William Shakespeare's *King Lear* anticipates core political dynamics of the English Civil War (1641-49), and philosophical tenets of the British Enlightenment in John Locke and David Hume. It analyzes three principle and competing paradigms of public authority in *King Lear*: theodicy, nature, and the autonomy of thought. The play is historically contextualized within the 16<sup>th</sup> century. *King Lear*, moreover, portends revolutionary new thought patterns: the centerless universe of modern astronomy, and human embeddedness in fluid nature without fixed identity. Three variants on the concept of "nothing" – existential, social, and philosophical – interweave the cosmic and political threads, based on a circular temporality. Shakespeare's character, Cordelia, affirms the everyday over the cosmic, and the sociological over the metaphysical. *King Lear* depicts a profound moral trans-valuation in early modern history, whose shifting temporal horizons remain central also to contemporary politics.

**Key words:** William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Tudor history, Stuart history, English Civil War, David Hume, Enlightenment, political pluralism, secularism, theocracy

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## **Contested public authority**

William Shakespeare's (1564-1616) *King Lear* (1603-6) anticipates defining features of England's 17<sup>th</sup> century political landscape, and the learnings derived from these experiences in the 18<sup>th</sup> century British Enlightenment. More deeply, *King Lear* portends revolutionary new thought patterns: the centerless universe of modern astronomy, and human embeddedness in fluid nature without fixed identity. This introduction will analyse three principle and competing conceptions of public authority in *King Lear*.

"My state stands on me to defend, not to debate" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 120). Thus proclaims Edmund, ascending to the height of personal glory and dynastic prestige, about to win the Anglo-French war near the climax of *King Lear*. The suppression of dialogue for *raison d'état* is a central theme of the play. Shakespeare's *King Lear* anticipates (1) core political "dynamics" of the English Civil War (1641-49), and (2) two "tenets" of the 18<sup>th</sup> century British Enlightenment. There is (3) a resultant cosmic picture, imputing a circular human existence. The beginning contains the end in the "little world of man" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 78).

Pathological narcissism underpins Lear's *raison d'état*. Everything is circular, like a spiral stairway, or a mirror reflection. There is no transparency in a world already filled with the meanings given by tradition. Lear articulates a political autoeroticism: "Which of you shall we say doth love me most, That we our largest bounty extend". He exchanges flattery for power. The opening scene: an assembly undertakes the "darker purpose" of "division of the kingdom". The haunting thematic of time and mortality, i.e. "nothing", is coiled at the heart of this scene: "Conferring [royal power] on younger strengths, while we unburdened crawl toward death" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 33-34). Intergenerational power transmission fuses human fate and cosmic meaning: "by the sacred radiance of the sun" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 36). Yet the high stakes political bargain goes horribly wrong. The dynamism of "doing" invades the stasis of "being": "nature [birth right] doth with merit challenge" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 33). The subterranean upheaval of autonomous behaviour overwhelms the controlled universal ceremony. The Duke of Cornwall evokes "our wrath, which men May blame but not control" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 93). Descent into carnage ensues, as order yields to

chaos. The Duke of Albany evokes "Humanity" preying compulsively "upon itself Like monsters of the deep" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 100). Lear's absolutism, despite the image of a total circle, i.e. the divine nexus of God, man, and the world, conceals a deeper history of cynical and cyclic wars among princes – in the mirror reflection of late medieval Christendom.

By the play's end, Edmund has employed frenzied ambition to seize total power. Ascending through betrayal of father and brother, and manipulation of Lear's two ambitious older daughters (Regan and Goneril), Edmund contemplates personal oligarchy. His character embodies an impersonal process: the psychic energies of resentment. The illegitimate brother to Edgar, yet loved equally by his father (Earl of Gloucester), he conspires to destroy them both "in the lusty stealth of nature" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 42). He hates conventional surfaces, deconstructively justifying his transgression through "nature": "when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeits of our own behaviour, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon and stars ... drunks, liars and adulterers by an enforced obedience of planetary influence" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 45). He declares "Nature" his "goddess" against the "plague of custom" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 42). Conservative traditionalism is a chessboard in Edmund's ambition for wealth and power: "if not by birth, have lands by wit: All ... that I can by fashion fit" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 46).

Between Lear's conservative obedience to "ceremony", and Edmund's radical obedience to "nature", the play concerns contested modes of public authority. Stripped of Lear's cosmology, embracing a naked power ethos ("The younger rises when the old doth fall"), Edmund reproduces Lear's auto-erotic politics in modernized form (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 83). His raw power, negating objective criticism, affirms sheer perspectivism: "True or false, it hath made thee Earl of Gloucester" (Shakespeare, 2004, 88). Moments later, Edmund falls, and the play's end returns to its beginning. The only real "obedience" is to "the weight of time" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 131). This circular pattern of temporality gives the whole play a roundness of necessity. Time destroys everything: "This great world shall so wear out to naught" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 110). This explains why the deeply religious Leo Tolstoy charged King Lear with being nihilistic (Orwell, p. 401-416). The coiled presence of time and mortality, i.e. "nothing",

from beginning to end, and end to beginning, shows as the hidden imperative beneath everyday life's surface.

Only, in the final moment, the values have changed. Honesty replaces convention: "Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 131). The Anglo-French war was a moral contest as well as a power struggle. Cordelia's original vision prevails. She, in the opening scene, upheld "honesty", saying "Love, and be silent" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 34). Returning from exile with the French army, she fought a war and died for love: "No blown ambition doth our arms incite, But love, dear love" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 104). Thus, Cordelia distinguished her vision from Edmund's "nature" and Lear's "convention". Both Cordelia and Edmund are activist rebels, offering different rationalizations of their modernist lines of action. Yet Cordelia's spurning of traditional courtly ceremony differs fundamentally from Edmund's revolt. Cordelia professes ordinary love as a new political horizon: in toiling, parenting, and dying, we esteem certain humans socially over others ("according to my bond, no more nor less") (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 35). Her innovation upholds the mundane as an ideal for living, even a banner of revolt, rather than simply an inferior reality as compared to eternity's perfection. Shakespeare's character, Cordelia, affirms the everyday over the cosmic, the sociological over the metaphysical, in a Copernican revolution in human politics. Her significance is in the interconnected elements of human fallibility, the dialogic, and the collective struggle for truth as a notion of justice.

The opening scene provides the context for Cordelia's revolt. When Lear divides his kingdom between his three daughters, Goneril and Regan's love soliloquys express conventionalized – and insincere – absolute love ("an enemy to all other joys"). Cordelia, shocking the court, casts critical doubt ("They love you all? ... Sure I shall never marry like my sisters, To love my father all") (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 35). There are three crucial points: (1) A simple logical observation, it links truth to sincerity rather than convention. Cordelia charges her sisters, and the king, with absurdity in political discourse. (2) She implies the king's merely fictitious "wholeness", while he is only one among many, with correspondingly divided affections. (3) Cordelia promotes an ethic of inquiry. For the "honesty" of these three observations, Cordelia is despised and disinherited (i.e. made a "stranger") (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 36). Losing inherited protective networks, she is "cast away" and "thrown to chance" (Shakespeare, 2004, p.

40). As Lear explains: "to shield thee from the disasters of the world" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 38). Cordelia's suitor, the Duke of Burgundy, rejects her ("her price is fall'n") (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 38). "Since respect and fortunes are his love", she concedes, "I shall not be his wife" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 40). Cordelia is a heroine of the autonomy of consciousness. Her exile is from the imaginative and material networks of the royal absolutist conception of the cosmos.

Cordelia's whole stance resembles arguments in John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), a post-English Civil War text which is the fountainhead of the 18<sup>th</sup> century European Enlightenment. Locke, denying inherent or cosmic meaning investing human social power, opposed metaphysical plunges into "the vast ocean of being" (Locke, p. 58). He argued that "customs from the very childhood" puts "absurdities" in the "mind". The "imagined infallible person dictates and demands assent without inquiry". Instead, Locke argues for "plain reason", and to "pursue truth sincerely" (Locke, p. 359). His secularized philosophy corresponds to Cordelia's "honesty", for which she makes an ultimate sacrifice, and which she connects to ordinary human love as the highest value. Cordelia is not simply being obstinate. She is leading a revolution in values, concerning the highest human ideal. When Cordelia says, "What I well intend, I'll do't before I speak" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 39), she is anticipating Locke's prioritizing language for "use of life" over metaphysical "perfection" (Locke, p. 560).

Others take up Cordelia's cause. It is a social movement. The King of France celebrates her "virtues". Against Lear's political demand for obedience in unconditional love, the Earl of Kent argues: "duty shall have dread to speak When power to flattery bows" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 37). He qualifies discourse in terms of a critical and dialogic function, i.e. plural and autonomous, beyond the mimesis of scripted ceremony. Kent's warning is that authority may collapse – of its own deluded and grotesque weight - in the absence of many-sided pressures and balances. Lear's desired peaceful transition fails because he is ignorant of the objective logic of power. He evokes royal authority through "the operation of the orbs From whom we do exist and cease to be" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 36). This cosmic grid, love as perfection uniquely for his sake, permits only his perception as the absolute limit of reality. Cordelia warns him against the "glib and oily art" of persuasion (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 39). While she predicts the

true end-result of the king's power game, her sisters feed Lear's narcissism to serve their own ends. The king is trapped in their web. He renounces his power, and is then shocked to be treated by his flatterers as a slave. The experience is the proof of power's objective logic over Lear's fancy, which he confused for received political wisdom.

Why does Lear's wisdom fail? Has the world changed? We don't know. The story is set in post-Roman but pre-Christian times. The chronology is spliced anachronistically with pagan and Christian images, in textual intersections where identities and meanings multiply and divide. It flashes with contemporary reference. Clearly, Shakespeare wrote of religion as a political phenomenon subject to good or bad use. No mere man, but a king, Lear's failing represents a deadly power vacuum ("Interest of territory, cares of state"). The royal basis in trust, kinship, and mutual protection oaths ("I must love you, and sue to know you better") meets shipwreck (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 34). "Words of love" mean dynastic power relations (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 38). As the territorial unit fails in stability and continuity, its gods are revealed as sadists: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 97). King Lear becomes a deranged and flower bedecked wanderer, an unlikely soldier, and finishes as a war prisoner following defeat in the culminating Anglo-French battle. The iconic storm shows that nature – clearly disenchanted -is indifferent to human destiny. In delirium, Lear envisions redemption through becoming "God's spies". Omniscient God cannot see, requiring an informer to disclose "Who loses and who wins, who's in, and who's out" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 121). Power – a natural phenomenon - is as ubiquitous and impersonal as the tides. It is surprising: ultimately, King Lear combines this dark theme of impotent blindness with a central affirmation of the ideal of human freedom.

At the outset, Lear's dogma of received political wisdom remains unshaken. He opposes Cordelia's "honesty" by evoking cosmic power: "truth then be thy dower! For, by the sacred radiance of the sun, The mysteries of Heccat and the night, By all the operations of the orbs From whom we do exist and cease to be" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 36). Her sister Goneril scolds, "You have obedience scant", revealing that conformity is at stake (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 41). Clearly, this is no ordinary family quarrel. Two rival social imaginaries, with corresponding power configurations, are clashing, and tearing King Lear's kingdom apart.

Only the contrast of Lear's religious behaviour, and Cordelia's science of human nature, makes intelligible Lear's crucial epiphany, at the close of the play, shortly before his death: "To say 'ay' and 'no' to everything that I said 'ay' and 'no' to was no good divinity" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 109). At the outset, the aging Lear embodied the ordered boundaries of conventional surfaces. Kingship was no accident of birth. It was a solemn and pre-scripted performance, upon which all life depended. Yet Lear's univocal religious authority, and forbidding of dissent, produces the disaster of state collapse. The assembly, intended "that future strife May be prevented now", depicts a story of mistaken motives (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 34). A violent power transfer fails to be avoided. And the mistaken motive is eternity, the perfectly good, in the traditional pattern of theodicy. The King Lear story articulates an alternate - Renaissance and humanist based - notion of good governance, gained at tragic but meaningful cost.

Let us examine the revolution. Marriage, family relations, inheritance, and spiritual crimes: these dissimulated tensions produced the violent overthrow of Lear's kingdom. The reformed Duke of Albany cites "others whom the rigour of our state Forced to cry out" as the war's principle cause (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 118). The upheaval turns the world upside down. Servants kill masters, in the "the chance of anger", undermining the hierarchic foundations of traditional cosmic world order (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 95). The Earl of Kent employs violence to "teach differences", which have hitherto been ontological self-evidence (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 50). Yet Kent, initially "too old to learn", embraces the verification principle: "Report is changeable. Tis time to look about" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 64, 117). The army seethes in unrest as "knights grow riotous" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 47). Collective meaning perishes in emptiness. The king - appointed by God as a judge - is "mad as a vexed sea" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 104). Clearly, as the example of Kent suggests, amidst this chaos, something important is being learned.

Suppression of dissent, and the struggle for voice amidst carnage, produces a revolutionary vision of community and universal values. The Earl of Gloucester, spitefully blinded, experiences an epiphany of eyeless sight: "distribution should undo excess, And each man have enough" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 98). Kent, the believer in "differences", returns behind the mask of Caius, and declares himself "a man", "no less than I seem", "honest", and prepared for "that which ordinary men are fit for"

(Shakespeare, 2004, p. 48). It is fallible humanism, susceptible to forgetting, amnesia, and dissimulation. Just before his mental breakdown, Lear says: "I will forget my nature" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 58). Lear realizes that power, far from divine, is essentially force: "the great image of authority: a dog's obeyed in office" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 110). Lear's is an epiphany of critical conscience. Obedience requires human reflection, in trial and error mode, not submission to the unified cosmic will which planets also obey. Here is the most fundamental political message of King Lear. Power is subject to the vicissitudes of ordinary human time, not a cosmic plan. Lear says: "they told me I was everything; 'tis a lie – I am not ague-proof" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 109).

The squalid inequalities, sacrifices, and losses of ordinary power haunt Shakespeare's King Lear. It is the product of a time of transition, and the breakup of personal identity attending loss of faith in the future. The web of timing, accident, and power are its principle thematic, against the metaphysical necessity and essential worth in all being of traditional theodicy. Like Thomas Hobbes' (1588-1679) *Leviathan* (1651), it existentially examines the terrors and possibilities of state collapse. Such experiences are mostly tragic from a humanist view, even if hope within worldly vicissitudes permit a non-necessitarian optimism - a distant glimmer worth staking one's only life for. This is what Cordelia does. It is customary to describe her death as senseless. Her death is tragic, but not senseless. It is the death of millions today who fight and die anonymously for a similar cause – individual human dignity against inflated power – the world over. Certainly, as with Cordelia, most of these victims are women.

### **"Nothingness" in King Lear**

The recurrent core image of "nothing" in King Lear is, firstly, in the all-destructive path of circular time. Lear's political epiphany concerns his own human finitude. It is a visceral and material insight. When Gloucester, near the end, proposes to kiss his hand, he says: "Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 110). This first image of "nothing" is existential. It is something like the vision of human fate as decay in Edgar Allen Poe (1809-1849), "natural images of the desolate or terrible", based on the "hideous dropping off of the veil" (Poe, p.62). If Shakespeare's vision of "nothing" had been limited to this, he would have been merely a forerunner of



the literary Gothic, exploring the dissolution of subjective identity through the uncontrolled materiality of time and decay.

King Lear has a second pervasive image of “nothing” which is social. It is in solitary death by exposure: once cut from inherited social networks, the characters suffer annihilation. In the opening scene, Lear inflicts this wantonly on Cordelia and the Earl of Kent. Edmund inflicts it on his brother, Edgar. In the social “nothing”, all boundaries are thrown into flux. Both Kent and Edgar wear a variety of masks in exile, suggesting the context-dependent nature of social identity. The Earl of Gloucester, exiled with his eyes gouged out, is guided by his own son without recognizing him, and is persuaded of fantastic but non-existent realities. The most iconic encounter with “nothing” is King Lear’s self-exile, as he wanders insane under the raging storm. The king seems drawn to ultimate cosmic power, in nature unveiled, but realizes it will impersonally destroy him. He is but a man. Here the existential and social “nothing” meet. The implication is that England’s entire underclass live in a condition of deadly vulnerability, in the existential “nothing” of grinding poverty without social assistance or support.

The “nothing” therefore has a social location, in disinherited nobles, and the impoverished majority. It is a “nothing” which is dynamic and dangerous: the future unknown. Lear’s madness allegorizes the “nothing” of state collapse. The expulsions of Cordelia, Kent, and Edgar allegorize the dissolution of protective social networks. Lear, in his fall from absolute power to tramp-hood, becomes the proverbial modern hero: a homeless wanderer in the desert of emptiness (“I abjure all roofs”) (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 74). This anticipates modern writers like Jack London (1876-1916) or Jack Kerouac (1922-1969). Lear discovers a brutally secular truth: “Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art” (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 86). Only by losing everything is self-knowledge attained. The illusions of power and comfort are destroyed. Behind power networks and conventions, all human beings are vulnerable, naked, and perishable: “Expose thyself to what wretches feel” (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 84).

Lear calls this harsh truth, philosophically, “the thing-itself” (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 86). This allusion to the metaphysical concept “substance” again anticipates Locke, for

whom “substances” signifies “nothing” (Locke, p. 100). The emptiness of King Lear represents a humanist principle of ordinary life denuded of higher cosmic meaning. Therefore “nothing” has a third meaning in King Lear, beyond the existential and social, which is philosophical. The Aristotelian maxim (“Nothing will come of nothing”) contends that “substance” transcends conditioned relations (Shakespeare, 2004, 134-35). Human identity is positively fixed and finished, while “nothing” is simply negative and without qualities. Aristotle’s view of human nature had social implications: “that which is able to supply physical labor is by nature a slave”, while “that which is able to plan and take forethought is by nature the master” (Aristotle, p. 430).

King Lear’s unfolding events, however, reveal “nothing” with many-sided moral meaning, in an unfinished universe. A king can fall to the level of a homeless wretch, and it is only a matter of variables within a homogenous humanity. This philosophical “nothing” is therefore a profoundly subversive image. It subverts the ontological Forms which explain – with one-dimensional clarity – ethical value, obligation, and identity. In the unified theocracy at King Lear’s outset, “nothing” is deceptively simple. The property and inheritance rules of unlimited sovereignty reflect cosmic auto-eroticism. It is total: “nothing” is excluded, and everything is explained. But the onset of political chaos in Lear’s kingdom reveals in “nothing” the new complexity of alternative unrealized possibilities. It opens a space of pragmatic pluralism, where everyday language is subject to multiple discourses of varying standards. Their very pluralism and fallibility implies their conventionality, or the absence of underlying supersensible object, i.e. the “nothing”.

Therefore, Edmund’s metaphysic of power struggle, and Cordelia’s humanist love, each carry one side in the double meaning of a new and acutely modernist “nothing” (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 42-43). Cordelia’s “nothing” represents refusal to surrender self into mass ceremonies. She refuses to soliloquize her love for the king in contest with her sisters. At Lear’s command, “Speak”, she replies; “Nothing, my lord”. Enraged, Lear retorts, “Nothing will come of nothing” (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 35). Meanwhile, Edgar’s “nothing” is the wilful distortion of antagonistic interests. He cunningly conceals a forged letter to draw his father’s interest, while calling it “nothing”. His father replies, the “quality of ‘nothing’ hath not such need to hide itself” (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 42-43). False rumours, politically manipulated to poison the

collective mind, are such a variation on “nothing”. However baseless empirically, the lie is made real by organized effort and malice. This is what Edmund does with masterful effect. Shakespeare’s premonition was later exemplified in the French Dreyfus Affair (1894-1906), and in 20<sup>th</sup> century hijackings of reality by various totalitarian regimes.

Yet the three meanings of “nothing”, ultimately, revert to the first in circular time. The structuring effect of time and mortality, i.e. “nothing”, casts over all three authority modes. Shakespeare invests “nothing” with a definite and universal ontological pattern. Here-in lies the buried central fact/value dichotomy in *King Lear*, despite the affirmation of autonomous consciousness. Its kernel is contained in Gloucester’s observation: “Though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects” (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 44). To construct systems of words, images, and reasonings (value), is never to escape the continual decay and pain inherent in objective material existence (fact). The play begins with Lear’s moment of indecision (“neither can make a choice of either”), reflecting an old man’s decayed judgment. The banal dialogue evokes the timing (“before he was sent for”) and accident (“the whoreson must be acknowledged”) of a destabilizing sexual politics, which corrodes the social framework (“order of law”) (Shakespeare, 2004, 33). The sexual basis of dynastic politics itself implies human finitude.

The initially infinite ideological space of Lear’s court denies human ephemerality. Cordelia’s revolt implies consciousness as a social tool for political maintenance. Within the organic chaos of random combinations, organized existence is a perennial struggle against decline. Hence: “Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide. In cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked ‘twixt son and father”. Gloucester concludes: “We have seen the best of our time. Machinations, hollowness, treachery and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves” (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 44). Time may be shrinking politically for Lear’s kingdom, but this expresses a deeper pattern inherent in Nature itself. A historical mood of decline, it is grounded in the conditions of existence of the animal species: “Man’s life is cheap as beast’s” (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 76).

The major evocation of this “nothing” is in the play’s denouement. Intrinsic to human consciousness in time are forgetting and timing. This “nothing” – implying the

impossibility of ever fully mastering destiny - is the great nut around which King Lear's finale hinges. Following the climatic death battle between brothers Edmund and Edgar, and Edmund's death, Cordelia's principle of "honesty" has, to all appearances, triumphed over "nature". Yet, some moments after, the assembly realize they have "forgotten" the question of Lear and Cordelia's whereabouts: "Great thing of us forgot!" Memory lapse, a display of human fallibility, seals the play's infamously bleak ending. Cordelia is hanged in a cell by one of Edmund's minions. The desperate plea, to "send in time", only underlines the reality of contingent timing over Providential justice (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 128). Thus, Kent cries: "Is this the promised end?" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 129).

When Albany attempts to superimpose a Providential narrative – "All friends shall taste The wages of their virtue, and all foes The cup of their deservings" – Lear shouts him down: "No, no, no life! Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, And thou no breath at all?" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 130). His cry suggests that biology is real, while divine creation and providence are comforts rather than facts. Lear's worldview has changed since the play's opening, and with it notions of authority, nature, and the place of humankind. The transcendent standard of the saint, relativized by everyday power, yields to the fallible humanist horizon of evolution, struggle, and extinction.

### **The 16<sup>th</sup> century History**

The template of Names had been Saint Augustine's (354-430) immutably perfect original design. Secular knowledge, for him, was mere "curiosity", seemingly "seized with the zeal for knowledge, when God alone knows all in a sovereign science" (Augustine, p. 63). The Augustinian knowledge paradigm was eternally fixed identities, and a revivalist political horizon. This worldview ruptures in King Lear, within a wider cultural pattern of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. King Lear exposes the horizon of a new secular meaning and ethics.

In Shakespeare, names become historical conventions, concerned with means, and prone to the accidental world of contingency. Meaning is secularized. The Providential Chain of Being yields to the living body and abject materiality. The all-unifying "great decay" is the central image of the play (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 130). The chasm dividing the eternal human soul from the beast's quick oblivion had centrally

defined Christian thought. In *King Lear*, the animate blurs with the inanimate, the human with the non-human, and the living with the dead. Everything passes in a brief flash.

Yet Shakespeare's material universe is an ethical reality. There is a path of the righteous human being, but without immortality or supernatural alliance. It is a humanism of growth, deliberate choice, transmission, and death, without the human as apex of eternal order. Here-in lies *King Lear*'s disturbing power, envisioning a meaningful and ethical world without anthropomorphic dogma. Here, also, is its elective affinity with the 17<sup>th</sup> century Scientific Revolution. Its image of reality, conveyed through the wheel and Cordelia's revolt, reckons with early modern knowledge of death, society, freedom, and the unique individual.

Let us consider the history. Cosmology, politics, and economics intermeshed, as kingship's traditional sacral power diminished. Firstly, the cosmological. Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1534), removing the earth from the cosmic centre, reduced it to a mere planet among countless. It implied an intellectual revolution. The celestial plane of immutable being yielded to a terrestrial or sublunary realm of change and decay (Koyré, p. 29). Hence, the centrality of cosmic decay as universally defining the human condition in *King Lear*. Christina of Sweden (1626-1689) questioned how, in Descartes' (1596-1650) infinitely extended universe, man could occupy the God-given central position in religious teaching (Koyré, p. 6). Hence, the context for the play's de-anthropomorphic vision.

Secondly, the politics. Two major dynastic feuds had exhausted England: The Hundred Years War (1413-53), followed by power struggle between rival descendants in the War of the Roses (1453-83). The ghosts of illegitimacy produced recurring cycles of state collapse. Henry VIII (1509-47) found a revolutionary, if bloody, solution to perennial political and economic disorder. He laid the rudimentary elements of the 17<sup>th</sup> century English market, which, creating "estatelessness", undermined the foundations of judgement about self and the world (Agnew, p. 62). Hence, the central existential problem of the "self" in *King Lear*.

Shakespeare's world had seen a revolution in institutions. Henry VIII not only defied Rome, but curbed England's three traditional powers: the medieval state, the church, and the barons. Ruling by personal prerogative, dissolving the monasteries, he shifted from Roman papacy to divinely ordained kingship. These oligarchic but revolutionary politics multiplied the king's own internally dissenting forces. Meritocracy advanced lawyers, i.e. Thomas Wolsey (1453-1530) and Thomas Cromwell (1485-1540). This legal elite enabled revolutionized land acquisition, and hence new court as well as parliamentary influence. Monastic land, sold to any stranger with money, created a revolutionary new merchant class, accessing landed status previously restricted to nobility. *King Lear* is replete with these themes of upstart powers, to the point of anarchy, where "every case in law is right" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 82).

There was a still broader upheaval in social embeddedness for the population, a portent of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Industrial Revolution. The enclosures of open fields had inflicted widespread and disruptive depopulation. *King Lear* is filled with images of mass misery. Guilt tortures the king, upon his witnessing the population's wretched plight: "Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are, houseless heads, unfed sides ... O, I have ta'en Too little care of this!" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 84).

The reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603) has much that illuminates *King Lear*. Often regarded as England's Golden Age of toleration, the Elizabethan period fostered England's Renaissance. Perhaps most striking is *King Lear*'s central political thematic of "love". Elizabeth's 1601 "golden speech", her last oration, concluded: "Though you have had, and may have, many mightier and wiser princes in this seat, yet ye never had, nor ever shall have, any that will love you better" (Jenkins, p. 130). Love was Elizabeth's code word for mutual consent. Cordelia's revolt affirmed an ordinary, everyday form of human love, far from the hierarchic and otherworldly divisions that had defined Christendom. Her humanism was revolutionary, for metaphysical love continued to dominate 17<sup>th</sup> century politics. Feudalism classed human beings in a fixed cosmic hierarchy based on kind and not degree. A royal Catholic prisoner in the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) was daily fed roast ducklings and strawberries by his gaolers, while the Protestant population perished from hunger. The Order of Rank therefore overrode even religious identity. A "person of quality" differed ontologically from an "ordinary

person" (Huxley, p. 169). The revolt against this social fact – i.e. a cultural construction of inequality - informs the revolutionary ethics of King Lear.

### **"Dynamics" and "Tenets": anticipating the 17<sup>th</sup> century**

The English Civil War "dynamics" and British Enlightenment "tenets" require historical explanation.

(1): Firstly, the English Civil War, culminating in the 1649 beheading of King Charles I and the declaration of a Republic, posed a fundamental question for political science. This corresponded to the dilemma of ephemerality at the heart of King Lear. It is almost like the Sphinx's riddle, suggesting the mortal limits of humankind:

Is consensus an ontological *point of departure* (i.e. dogma), to be maintained through state violence, or, is consensus *ongoingly reached*, through the division of powers, based on multiple points of view? We confront two distinctive temporal horizons, and opposed notions of truth: provisional and absolute. At bottom, the difference is between dialogue and violence in conflict resolution for the increasingly complex societies of early modernity.

Historical "dynamics" corresponded to this political science question. The English Civil War swung between two political paradigms of consensus and truth. Experiments alternated between: (1) "healing and settling" political orders (1653-54), based on (highly restricted) Parliamentary politics; this was exemplified in John Milton (1608-74), Puritan revolutionary and author of *Paradise Lost* (1667), who argued that men "should be free ... openly to give opinions of any doctrine, and even to write about it, according to what each believes" (Hill, p. 154). (2) "Godly rule" through military dictatorship, intended to "speed" religious reformation of the national population, under a "saintly" order (the Barebones Parliament of 1653, and the Major-Generals of 1655-56) (Ashley, p. 34). In the name of "Godly rule", Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) fused violence, the sacred truth, and republican politics. The ideological kernel was the rejection of "chance". Cromwell exemplified the discourse regarding the 1649 invasion of Ireland: to call it "a thing of chance" was to "rob God of all the glory" (Cromwell, p. 6). The Drogheda massacre was justified to the Parliament as "a righteous judgement of God" (Ashley, p. 94). The "act of violence" finds its "justification" not in "vain

imaginings” but “the compass of certain knowledge” (i.e.; Providential knowledge) (Cromwell, p. 14).

The first English Civil War paradigm embraced provisional truth and consensus as a permanent goal; the second absolute truth, and consensus as a point of departure to be imposed. These two poles constitute the political context for Lear’s gradual descent into madness. King Lear anticipated a larger European political vista: the 17<sup>th</sup> century crisis of absolutism. Europe was divided between two national models: Louis XIV’s (1638-1715) Catholic Absolutism in France – hunting feudal enemies like wild game to secure national unity - and the constitutional experiment of the Dutch Republic (Kirchner, p. 58). The “dynamic” of opposing paradigms of truth and consensus, therefore, encompassed the European continent. The English Civil War dealt with early modern nation-making, i.e. the conflict between the market and organized social life. It was an instance of “the Machiavellian moment”: achieving consent among a resistant population, within a centralizing regime, newly established through traumatic political violence (Pocock, p. 1-15).

(2): King Lear anticipates two British Enlightenment “tenets”, anticipating David Hume’s (1711-1776) *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739). Firstly, the “nature”/ “convention” dualism is resolved into “nature”/ “nothing”. King Lear’s emptiness has a political meaning. Although convention has temporal power, it has no permanent essence, is transient and accidental, and therefore is “empty”. Secondly, King Lear also affirms the crucial dialogic role, i.e. of power sharing, in good governance. These tenets interrelate: for, if there is no absolute truth, no individual can rule unilaterally based on absolute knowledge. The truth, it follows, is a temporal matter of collective dialogue and experiment. This is a basic political message of King Lear, embodied in Cordelia’s “war of love”. And so, it was for Hume, among the greatest 18<sup>th</sup> century philosophers of the European Enlightenment.

Hume’s *Treatise* is a sociological, rather than ontological, view of institutions. Hume – against the entire Western tradition - argued that human beings have no ontological identity (Hume, p. 301). Totality is imaginary: “the whole universe *may be considered as a unite* [but the] term of unity is merely a fictitious denomination” (Hume, p. 79). This anti-metaphysical philosophy, i.e. emptiness, had several political



consequences. Hume theorized the lesson of the 17<sup>th</sup> century “dynamic” in terms of human freedom, as a philosophical “tenet”.

Firstly, Hume prioritized “the conduct of men” (i.e. institutions) over “original principles” (i.e. non-negotiable consensus) in nation-making (Hume, p. 578). This should remind us of the opening debate in *King Lear*, the birth of Cordelia’s revolt. Remedy can “only come from the consent of men” (Hume, p. 587). The centrality of consent in the ordered intergenerational transmission of government pervaded *King Lear*. Obedience derives from “the institution of government”, not “obedience to government”, i.e. dialogic (Hume, p. 595, 546). This required a fallible epistemology: “a hundred different accidents, which cannot be foreseen by the mind” (Hume, p. 117). Political obligation is based on “human conventions” (Hume, p. 594). By extension, “Mankind is an inventive species” where the “rules of justice” are “artificial”, but not “arbitrary” (Hume, p. 536). Because mankind is one species, Hume promoted the secular humanist ethic of equality: “We consider not whether the persons ... be our acquaintance or strangers, countrymen or foreigners” (Hume, p. 633). These themes are also prominent in *King Lear*.

Hume’s anti-metaphysical philosophy rejects Perfection as a political ideal. Politics is partly “accidental”, the “effect of many ages”, and grounded in the “every day” (Hume, p. 544). Similarly, perfection is criticised in *King Lear*, in favor of a social vision of the human condition. Hume evoked early modern nation-building in a web of institutional linkages: “industry, traffic, manufactures, law-suits, war, leagues, alliances, voyages, travels, cities, fleets, ports, and all those other actions and objects, which cause such diversity ... at the same time maintain such a uniformity in human nature” (Hume, p. 450). Precisely the emptiness of human nature makes us the same everywhere, despite the cosmically imputed differences of traditional religions. Human reality required secular analysis: a “cautious observation of human life” in the “common course of the world” (Hume, p. 46). The methodology eschews “definitions” (i.e. essences) in favor of “description”, detailing “enumeration” of “circumstances” (Hume, p. 329). This should remind us of the Earl of Kent: “Report is changeable. Tis time to look about” (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 117).

Secondly, Hume adopted the ethical template of a middle-way (“some medium”) between “rigid stability” and “uncertain adjustment”, an alternative to “violence” (Hume, p. 566). For “eternal” values render all “other circumstances (i.e. conditions, means) entirely arbitrary”, and are “not admitting of degrees” (Hume, p. 508-12). This tradition of dispensing with dogmatic beliefs to promote tolerance links Hume to the Earl of Shaftesbury (a “lighter” world beyond “bloodshed, wars, persecution and devastation”) (Kramnick, p. 96). Clearly, this is a core theme in *King Lear*, in the Earl of Kent’s ideal of the “modest truth” (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 115).

It follows that *King Lear* concerns political responsibility and agency. Lear initially, habitually, uses the language of divine governance: “by the sacred radiance of the sun, The mysteries of Heccat and the night” (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 36). Even renouncing power, transferring his kingdom to his progeny, he voices a unified cosmic will. Lear falls because he tragically underestimates the autonomous existence of others. As with Lear, so with 17<sup>th</sup> century Natural Rights philosophers (mostly refugees of the religious wars), and also with Hume, pluralism is the core issue. The Earl of Kent attempts to save Lear from himself by “helping him to see better” (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 37). Lear accuses him of seeking to “come betwixt our sentence and our power”, i.e. of dividing absolute power through dialogic intervention. “Seeing” therefore implies acknowledgment of a society of plural perspectives. Omniscient auto-eroticism contrasts with “seeing”, the unique perceptions of persons.

Here, then, are the principle lessons of *King Lear*. Lear learns all of this during his tragic fall. His fall allegorizes our world, where violent political totalization (religious or secular) produces the tragedy of state collapse and civil war. Its lesson is in toleration and freedom of conscience. This, in turn, requires a formal separation: organized institutions, whose narrow monopoly on cosmic meaning and identity excludes numberless citizens, must remain an option in the private sphere, not a state politics. Cordelia may not have explicitly articulated this theory of secularism. Her utterances, risks, and entire line of action, however, implied it as a new worldview. It was the worldview, also, of religious thinkers like Milton, who tried to square modern freedom with Theodicy. In *Paradise Lost*, he argued: “Who can in reason then or right assume Monarchy over such as live by right (and liberty)” (Milton, p. 122).

## Conclusion

At his death, the now reformed champion of "nature", i.e. pure selfishness, Edmund says "The wheel is come full circle. I am here". He implies a just order in the universe. Similarly, his brother, Edgar, says: "The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices Make instruments to plague us" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 126). With relief from the upheaval, a notion of theodicy creeps back in. Only moments later, the tragedy of Cordelia's death by absent mindedness shatters this illusion. The image of the wheel transforms. There is no teleology of the good. The wheel is simply time.

The notion exists that, if human life is simply time, then moral nihilism must follow. This corresponds to a devaluing of earthly life, with respect to eternity. It is in the teachings of some of the greatest religious traditions. For example, the Holy Qur'an indicts pre-Islamic Arabs in these terms: "Yet they say: 'There is nothing but the life of this world. We die and we live, and only time annihilates us'" (Ali, p.429). Viewing the bulldozed political landscape of post-World War I (1914-1918), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) concluded his philosophical magnum opus, *Being and Time* (1927), with, "Does time itself reveal itself as the horizon of *being*?" (Heidegger, p. 398). Heidegger presented a conspicuously gloomy and joyless picture of life. This is far from Shakespeare's vision. For him, "love is begun by time", and "There lives within the very flame of love A kind of wick or snuff that will abate it" (Shakespeare, 1993, p. 129). There is no eternity or afterlife in Shakespeare's vision, but ethical conundrums within the ephemeral tangle of human relationships. Their importance is no less. Value shifts from imagined eternity to ephemeral reality.

Sometimes *King Lear* presents time as stoicism in moment by moment existence, with knowledge of inexorable biological power. As Edgar famously says to his suicidal father: "Men must endure Their going hence, even as their coming hither; Ripeness is all" (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 120). The mind and body, this suggests, are really one: "We are not ourselves When nature, being oppressed, commands the mind To suffer with the body" (Shakespeare, 2004, 70). Or: "When the mind's free, the body's delicate" (Shakespeare, 2004, 83). Death, anticipating the path-breaking thought of Ernst Mach (1838-1916), is a continuous material process: "That we the pain of death would hourly die, Rather than die at once" (Shakespeare, 2004, p.126). As Mach wrote: "That which we so much dread in death, the annihilation of our permanency, actually occurs in life in

abundant measure” (Mach, p. 4). The wheel seems to be materiality, and its corruption. This was also Hume’s non-linear view of reality.

Yet “ripeness” is not entirely natural. It is also social. This too was emphasized by Mach, as well as sociological pioneer Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), who both separately took up the mantle of Cordelia’s humanist revolt. The Fool’s famous line, “Thou should’st not have been old till thou hadst been wise”, suggests the possibilities of learnings in experience (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 58). Crudely determinate destiny as inevitability is an illusion, as embraced by Edmund to justify his own worst impulses. Although claiming to take responsibility for his own actions, Edmund realized, at the point of death, that he had hidden behind an abstraction no less than King Lear. It was a rationale for ignoring his everyday debt to others. Lear failed to learn because he did not listen to others, only to his own narcissism masked as a cosmic order.

The Fool accuses Lear of having “mad’st thy daughters thy mothers”, suggesting the turning of a wheel at the end of one’s life (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 52). This is the natural wheel of biological life. Goneril says “Old fools are babes again” (Shakespeare, 2004, p.47). Elsewhere, the Fool tells Kent, warning him of the folly in remaining loyal to a declining regime: “Let down thy hold when a great wheel runs down a hill, lest it break thy neck with following” (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 70). This is where the social intervenes to thwart inevitability. For, rather than opportunistically letting go, Kent holds on. To be sure, he is on the same material wheel of time and decay: “we that are young Shall never see so much, nor live so long” (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 131). The universe, Kent suggests, is running down with every generation. All of nature and the earth will one day vanish. But through his struggle, as we have seen, Kent changes and learns. He obtains wisdom. He embraces “mature time” and “modest truth” (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 114-115). Kent upholds an ideal, Cordelia’s ideal of “honesty” and autonomous conscience. So it is with King Lear, also, who, transformed by humility, describes himself upon “a wheel of fire” and “mainly ignorant” (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 116-117).

An ideal does not transcend time, but it transcends generations. Hence, it is worth fighting for, so long as life remains upon the earth. Despite the best efforts of contemporary scoundrels like U.S. President Donald Trump to set the planet ablaze through short-sighted greed and scientific ignorance, to suppress organized dissent (i.e. media) through sheer narcissism, and to openly spread toxic lies, we are still here today

to oppose what he stands for. The state is not merely to be defended, reflecting a man's vanity. Good governance in modern complex societies requires the multi-centered dynamic of independent thought and debate, a respect for secular truth, and an all-embracing humanist principle of equality.

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