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“O, I have ta’en too little care of this”: What Lear Learns in the Storm

December 14, 2022: Gary L. Tandy

Felix Darley, “King Lear”, approximately 1885, Image courtesy of the Folger Shakespeare Library

In Act III of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Lear stops shouting at the storm long enough to utter this question:

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,

That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,

How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,

Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you

From seasons such as these?[1]

The speech marks a turning point for Lear, who up to this point in the play has shown concern about only one person: himself. Now as he finds himself naked on the stormy heath, rejected by his daughters, at the mercy of the storm, he appears to have a change of heart. Lear seemingly begins to think about others who, like him, have no roof over their heads for protection from the elements.

LEAR BEFORE THE STORM

In order to appreciate how the storm scene is critical to Lear's development as a character—and to a theme of the play—we need to look at how Shakespeare portrays Lear in Acts I and II. In the tumultuous first act, Lear demonstrates vanity, foolishness, and rashness. In scene one, Lear announces his plan:

Tell me, my daughters—

Since now we will divest us both of rule,

Interest of territory, cares of state—

Which of you shall we say doth love us most?

That we our largest bounty may extend

Where nature doth with merit challenge. (I.1.47-51)

When his youngest daughter Cordelia refuses to play along with the flattery game, he decides to withhold her inheritance. His foolishness is seen in his decision to give away his kingdom while trying to retain "the name, and all the additions to a king" (I.1.136). In other words, he wants the power and title but not the responsibility that goes with kingship. Further, as Graham Martin and Stephen Regan note, Shakespeare's play was performed before an audience for whom the stability of the Elizabethan state had depended on the life of its monarch, Elizabeth, and then on the uncontested succession of James VI of Scotland. Consider the impact of the opening scene of King Lear against such a history: a strong, ageing monarch proposing to divide his kingdom among three sets of rulers, one of whom might be the King of France. How could this not strike a contemporary audience as a recipe for political disaster—civil war, or foreign invasion, or both?[2]

Lear's rashness is seen when he banishes Kent, his most loyal servant, because Kent dares to contradict him and admonish him for his unjust treatment of Cordelia. In this opening scene, Lear rejects the two people who love him most: Cordelia and Kent. Lear himself admits that Cordelia has always been his favorite (I.1.122), yet he denounces her in favor of Goneril and Regan, both of whom, Shakespeare takes pains to show, are clearly operating from self-interest and not from any love for their father. By the end of the first scene, Lear stands guilty of multiple sins, which will lead to tragic consequences as the play unfolds.

In fact, one way to view King Lear is that Shakespeare takes his tragic hero on a journey or quest where he must learn to be virtuous and to become, not just a good king, but a good human being. At the very least, he must acknowledge and own his mistakes and the poor moral character he has displayed and seek to make amends. In place of vanity and pride, he must learn humility. In place of selfishness, he must learn pity and compassion for others. In place of foolishness, he must learn wisdom. (And, as is so often the case, that wisdom must be learned through suffering). Finally, in place of self-love, he must learn to love, not only his family members and members of his court, but also all the inhabitants of his kingdom, including "the least of these" Jesus references in the parable of the Sheep and the Goats.[3] In Christian terms, Lear must learn to love his neighbor as himself.[4] In fact, I argue that learning to love is the central objective of Lear's quest and that the first step on the quest is to learn a different definition of love.

In the remainder of Act I and throughout Act II, Lear continues to demonstrate his vanity, foolishness, and rashness. As part of his desire to retain the trappings of kingship, Lear has decided to live with Goneril and Regan and their husbands, staying at each estate for a month at a time. Of course, he retains a retinue of one hundred knights, which his daughters must accommodate as well. This plan flounders after only a few days with Goneril because she claims that Lear and his knights are disrupting her household and showing disrespect towards her servants. For his part, Lear feels slighted, perceiving "a most faint neglect of late" (I.4.67). Lear, in a huff, acts rashly, electing to leave Goneril's early and stay with Regan. Goneril sends a letter ahead to Regan informing her of the problems their father and his retinue have caused at her home. Act II ends with a showdown between Lear and both daughters, who say they will shelter Lear but not his knights. Calling both daughters "unnatural hags," Lear curses them and makes another

prideful and rash decision: to take his chances outdoors on the stormy heath rather than to apologize and seek shelter with one of his daughters. In his plea to Regan, Lear states:

thou better know'st [than Goneril] the offices of nature, bond of childhood,

Effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude;

Thy half o'the kingdom hast thou not forgot,

Wherein I thee endowed. (II.4.178-181)

Lear's skewed ideas of parent-child relationships are clear as he describes a quid pro quo arrangement where his daughters are bound to respect and care for him because of the wealth and power he's shared with them. Lear desperately needs to learn the lesson spoken by France in Act I: "Love's not love/when it is mingled with regards that stand/Aloof from the entire point" (I.1.242-244).[5] France obviously practices what he preaches by taking the wrongly discredited Cordelia to be his wife. Ultimately, Lear expects gratitude, loyalty, and kindness from others but doesn't offer the same in return. Up to this point in the play, Lear defines love as transactional—something to be bargained for, not something that is freely given and freely received. Seeing the extent of Lear's bad behavior and faulty moral compass in the first two acts, the play's audience could be forgiven for expecting Lear to continue down the same selfish path, just like other tragic figures (e.g., Macbeth). After all, what would it take to change an old man so entrenched in his pride, foolishness, and rashness? Shakespeare gives us the answer in Act III. It takes a catastrophic natural event—a storm in which the King finds himself vulnerable to the elements and is forced to confront his nakedness, both physical and moral.

LEAR DURING THE STORM

With this background, we can now return to Lear's "poor naked wretches" speech quoted earlier. As noted, this speech is significant because it is one of the first times in the play that Lear has expressed true concern for others. Shakespeare, however, has prepared us for this moment earlier in the storm scene when Lear notices that his Fool is cold and says he has "one part of his heart that is sorry yet for thee" (III.1.68-73). In Scene 4, Kent and the Fool find the hovel that will provide shelter and invite the King to enter, but Lear refuses, encouraging Kent and then the Fool to enter before him:

Prithee, go in thyself; seek thine own ease.

This tempest will not give me leave to ponder

On things would hurt me more. But I'll go in.

[To the Fool] In, boy; go first. You houseless poverty—

Nay, get thee in. I'll pray, and then I'll sleep. (III.4.23-27)[6]

Lear's new concern for others begins, not with generic humankind (the poor naked wretches) but with two specific humans whose needs he acknowledges and places before his own. It might seem a small act of human kindness or even good manners for him to encourage Kent and the Fool to seek shelter first, but for a king, especially a king like Lear who is used to going first, used to receiving preferential treatment — in fact, as we saw at Goneril's house in Act I — demanding it, the gesture takes on added significance. It is, indeed, a move towards "charity" or agape, in the Biblical sense.[7] We could say of Lear what the narrator of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* says of Edmund when he sees the squirrel family who have been turned into stone by the White Witch: "For the first time, Edmund felt sorry for someone besides himself."[8] In Lewis's tale, Edmund experiences redemption. After betraying his siblings to follow the White Witch, his life is redeemed by Aslan's sacrifice and he is forgiven by his brother and sisters. Perhaps Lear's change of heart in the storm is the beginning of a kind of redemption, or even a conversion, for him. It seems significant, for example, that in the passage quoted above, he turns to prayer. And, as noted above, here again we see Shakespeare defining love in a Biblical way: "So that nothing is done through self-interest or empty pride. But that in humility, everyone thinks others better than himself."[9]

One way to see the significance of the "poor naked wretches" speech is to contrast it with Lear's earlier statements about the storm near the beginning of Act III. Implying that the storm is the gods' instrument to punish evildoers, Lear describes himself as a "man more sinned against than sinning" (III.2.59-60). But now he has moved from justifying himself to identifying with the sufferers in the world — and not only to identify with them but to pity them.

Shakespeare's use of the word "houseless," which occurs twice in these passages, is worth unpacking. According to Bartlett, the usage is unique to King Lear.[10] Shakespeare never uses the word "homeless" in the plays.[11] From a contemporary perspective, we can note that the word "houseless" has been preferred recently to "homeless" when referring to the thousands who live on the streets of our cities in makeshift shelters and tents. Perhaps Shakespeare coined a term to describe a problem in his day that would come to be used four hundred years later to describe a similar problem in twenty-first century society.

Though the word "houseless" only occurs in Act III, the theme runs throughout King Lear. After all, the play opens with two of the main characters—Cordelia and Kent—becoming houseless. Cordelia loses her inheritance including her dowry and must leave England for France with her new husband. Kent is banished from England for what Lear sees as insubordination and disloyalty, effectively becoming a man without a country. As for King Lear, his decision to divide the governance of the country between his two daughters and

their husbands leaves him, in effect, houseless, a condition most clearly seen in the storm scene. And again, it takes the natural catastrophe, the fury of the storm, to force Lear into the crisis of conscience where he can, for once, lay aside his pride and privilege and begin to sympathize and empathize with someone besides himself. As C.S. Lewis notes, for some of us, God must use suffering to make us admit our guilt and move toward repentance: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."[12]

With due respect to Lewis, sometimes God gets our attention by shouting at us not just through our own pain but through the pain of others, as we see in *King Lear*. On the heath, Lear becomes aware, not only of his own pain, but has his eyes opened to the pain of others — like the Fool, Kent, and especially Edgar, who adopts the identity of a houseless beggar, Tom o' Bedlam.[13] Given this background, Lear's interest, almost obsession, with Poor Tom in the storm scene becomes even more significant. Initially, Lear identifies with Tom as a fellow sufferer, asking him if his daughters have brought him to his current condition. Later, Lear becomes intrigued by Edgar's speech. Though much of it is pure nonsense, Lear takes him for a philosopher, calling him an Athenian. Whatever other symbolic value Edgar/Tom may have in the play, he stands on the heath as a real-life embodiment of the houseless, poor, naked wretches who are the subjects of Lear's prayer. Lear continues with this reflection:

O, I have ta'en

Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;

Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,

That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,

And show the heavens more just.[14]

"I have ta'en too little care of this." The final pronoun in Shakespeare's line is wondrously ambiguous. What is the "this" that Lear has taken too little care of? The poor naked wretches of the world, and probably also, more broadly, the condition, the plight of the poor, the homeless, the mentally ill, the immigrant, the marginalized, the neglected, the oppressed. At the very least, Lear must be confessing his own ignorance or lack of concern for his society's most vulnerable. He's been King for a long time. No doubt he's lived a sheltered and pampered existence, especially when compared to the lives of those on the lowest rung of the social ladder in his kingdom. Has he simply been oblivious to the plight of the poor naked wretches in his kingdom? Such might be the explanation of sociologist Allan G. Johnson, who lists several reasons why dominant groups in society tend not to engage with issues like poverty, oppression, and marginalized populations, the first of which is this:

Because they don't know it exists in the first place. They're oblivious to it. The reality of privilege doesn't occur to them because they don't go out of their way to see it or ask about it . . . . This obliviousness allows them to cruise along and tend to the details of their own lives with only an occasional sense of trouble somewhere "out there" just beyond the fringe of their consciousness.[15]

Johnson's observation seems to describe Lear's situation—at least partially. As King, at the top of the social ladder of his day, it was easy to remain in a state of ignorance, even obliviousness, about those at the bottom of the ladder. It was only when, stripped of power, wealth, and privilege, Lear himself had to "bide the pelting of the pitiless storm" that he began to identify with the poor and oppressed. Only then did Lear go from having a vague sense of trouble somewhere out there to having a sense that the problems of the poor and the marginalized were his problem, his issue. As Lear's reflection states, the medical antidote ("physic") to ignorance and indifference is to "expose" yourself to feel "what wretches feel." Later in the scene, Lear's vulnerability is taken to the extreme when he removes his clothes to stand naked in the storm.

But perhaps to explain Lear's crisis of conscience only by obliviousness is to let him off the hook too easily and to minimize the moral element of Shakespeare's critique of Lear. Such a critique might involve interpreting "I have ta'en too little care of this" to mean that Lear, in leading such a self-absorbed life, has failed to heed the biblical injunction to "love thy neighbor as thyself." Because Lear has failed in the past to love his neighbor, the storm scene may be seen as a kenotic event where the King rejects his divine nature and, like Jesus, empties himself, taking the form of an ordinary human, even a slave.[16]

BIBLICAL ECHOES IN *KING LEAR*

While Lear's story is set in pre-Christian times with many references to the gods, the influence of the planets, and fate, there are perhaps an equal number of allusions to Christian faith and texts in the play, as multiple critics have pointed out. For example, Roger L. Cox suggests that Lear must learn certain virtues in the course of the play. The virtues Cox identifies are patience, kindness, and endurance.[17] Both Roy Battenhouse[18] and Maynard Mack[19] have seen within the play allusions to the Old Testament story of Nebuchadnezzar, the prideful king who was brought low by God and lived in a desert like an animal, undergoing a period of madness before being restored to the kingship. Walter Stein also sees that Lear is on a journey in the play, but Stein sees his journey as mirroring the sacrament of baptism as practiced in the Elizabethan church.[20] Stein notes that Lear's "changes have their commencement in the storm" and that during it Lear's understanding of love "begins the process of being purged of selfishness," and that in the storm Lear "joins the communion of those who suffer."[21] Both Roger L. Cox and Frederick Buechner see St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians as a

biblical text key to understanding the play, or, perhaps, to understanding Shakespeare's defining (and redefining) of love in this play.[22]

Buechner, who calls *King Lear* the "most profoundly religious of all Shakespeare's plays,"[23] notes the frequent echoes in the play of a text from I Corinthians:

But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise. And God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the mighty things. And vile things of the world, and things which are despised, God has chosen, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are.[24]

Buechner notes,

Not only are the foolish wise in his play and the wise foolish, just as the weak are strong in it and the strong weak, but what seems to be nothing—a word that Lear and Cordelia, Edmund and Gloucester, and the Fool all play upon at some length—turns out to be something of surpassing importance, as it does when in answer to Lear's "What can you say to draw a third more opulent than your sisters?" Cordelia's "nothing" contains the whole richness and truth of her love contrasted with her sisters' deceit. It is almost possible to think of Shakespeare as having written the entire play as a gloss on St. Paul, adding to it such other paradoxes of his own, as that it is the sane who are mad and mad sane, just as it is also the blind who see and the seeing who are blind.[25]

Buechner's explanation of the use of the word "nothing" in the biblical text and in the play has direct application to our earlier discussion of houselessness, Lear, and Edgar. Disguised as Poor Tom, Edgar represents those humans despised as nothing in the world. Again, it is Lear's encounter with the low and despised in the world that leads to his moral awakening.

To the I Corinthians text, we could add another that has not been featured in Christian readings of the play: the Sheep and the Goats parable from Matthew's gospel:

Then the king shall say to those on his right hand, 'Come you blessed of My Father. Take the inheritance of the Kingdom, prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me food. I thirsted, and you gave Me drink. I was a stranger, and you took Me in to you. I was naked, and you clothed Me. I was sick, and you visited Me. I was in prison, and you came to Me.[26]

When the righteous plead ignorance of seeing or helping Jesus in any of these situations, Jesus replies: "Truly I say to you, inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these, my brothers, you have done it to Me."[27] Since Jesus's story is set in the context of a judgment scene, it implies that our very salvation depends on the way we both see and respond to the needs of what Lear calls the "poor naked wretches" of the world. In the terms of Matthew 25, Lear has spent the first two acts of the play as a goat, but in Act III he

takes the first steps toward becoming a sheep. Apparently, for Shakespeare, as in Catholic moral theology, this pity and compassion for others lies at the very heart of the Gospel, and it is in the storm scene that we see this emphasis most clearly.

LEAR AFTER THE STORM

We observe the fruits of what Lear learns in the storm near the end of the play. We see it first as Lear is reunited with Cordelia. He is barely able to identify her as his daughter in his grief and madness. When he does, his first words are those of confession:

Be your tears wet? Yes, faith. I pray, weep not.

If you have poison for me I will drink it.

I know you do not love me, for your sisters

Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.

You have some cause, they have not. (IV.7.73-77)

And Cordelia in her love forgives him: “No cause, no cause” (IV.7.78). We see it most clearly, when, after Edmund has ordered Lear and Cordelia to be imprisoned, Lear speaks these moving words:

Come, let’s away to prison.

We two alone will sing like birds i’th’ cage.

When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down

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 walled prison, packs and sects of great ones,

That ebb and flow by th’ moon.” (V.3.8-19)

Christian language pervades this passage: blessing, kneeling, forgiveness, praying, singing, and, for the first time in the play, God (not gods), and the closing lines, in particular, imply an eternal perspective with its talk of the “mystery of things” and of Lear and Cordelia as “God’s spies.” Just as striking is how radically different this Lear is from the one we encountered in the first acts of the play. Like Gloucester, who stumbled when he saw (IV.1.19), the old king, having been blinded by his selfishness, grief, and suffering, finally sees into the truth of things, his love for his daughter so strong that even prison will be transformed into a place of peace and blessing. Lear has finally learned to love and, just as important, he has learned that he is loved by Cordelia, who has returned from France, risking her life to save him, and by Kent, who in spite of being banished stands by Lear, expressing his love and care of the King until the very end. And Lear can finally understand fully the worth of that love: “Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia, the gods themselves throw incense” (V.3.20-21).

The focus of this essay has been on what Lear learns in the storm, but it concludes with two reflections on what we as contemporary readers might learn from our imaginative experience of Lear’s story. First, we might learn that in one sense, the poor naked wretches of this world are all of us. Whether we are young and full of hope or old and cynical, we are all of us as vulnerable as Lear to the pitiless storm that is life—with its failures and victories, its sorrows and joys, its maddening paradoxes of injustice and redemption, blindness and sight, betrayal and loyalty, hatred and love. But while this sobering and frightening vision of life threatens to dominate the play, Shakespeare also suggests a way for followers of Christ to live in the face of an evil world. We can reject the temptations to selfishness, power, and violence of Edmund, Goneril, Cornwall, and Regan and instead chose the way of love, pity, and compassion represented by Kent, Cordelia, Albany, Edgar, the unnamed servant[28] who stands up (and sacrifices his life) against Cornwall, and, ultimately, King Lear himself. And perhaps especially for those of us who occupy, like Lear, a position of privilege in our society, we can open our eyes to the suffering and oppressed of our world. We can give food and drink to the hungry and thirsty; we can welcome the stranger; we can clothe the naked; we can take care of the sick; we can visit those in prison. But first, like Lear, we may have to admit that *we have taken too little care of this.*

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[1] William Shakespeare, *King Lear from The Necessary Shakespeare*, 5th. Edition, David Bevington, ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2017), III.4.28-32.

[2] Graham Martin and Stephen Regan, "King Lear," in *Shakespeare: Texts and Contexts.* Ed. Kiernan Ryan (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 246.

[3] Matthew 25:40, Revised Geneva Translation.

[4] Matthew 22:39, Revised Geneva Translation.

[5] See also Shakespeare's Sonnet 116: "Love is not love/Which alters when it alteration finds."

[6] Note that this passage is not included in all editions of the play. Most contemporary scholars would hold that this means that it was, indeed, included in some productions of the play. Such inclusion certainly adds support to the reading that Lear is experiencing a new orientation toward others that is key to his repentance.

[7] cf. 1 Corinthians 13.

[8] C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: Collier Books, 1970), 113.

[9] Philippians 2:3, Revised Geneva Translation.

[10] John Bartlett, *Complete Concordance to Shakespeare* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 771.

[11] The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites the first example of "homeless" being used in English as 1615.

[12] C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 93.

[13] Bevington's footnote to I.1.139 reads: "Tom o' Bedlam, a lunatic patient of Bethlehem Hospital in London, turned out to beg for his bread." Lear both fears madness and veers toward becoming a madman.

[14] *King Lear*, III.4.39 [First Folio edition].

[15] Allan G. Johnson, *Privilege, Power and Difference* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 74.

[16] Philippians 2:1-11.

[17] Roger L. Cox, "King Lear and the Corinthian Letter" in *Shakespeare's Christian Dimension*, Roy Battenhouse, ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 453-457.

[18] Roy Battenhouse, "Comment and Bibliography" in *Shakespeare's Christian Dimension*, 444-448.

[19] Maynard Mack, "Archetype and Parable in King Lear" in *Shakespeare's Christian Dimension*, 457-460.

[20] Walter Stein, "The Extreme Verge of Lear's Madness" in *Shakespeare's Christian Dimension*, 462-469.

[21] Ibid., 468.

[22] Roger L. Cox, "King Lear and the Corinthian Letter" in *Shakespeare's Christian Dimension*, 453-457; Frederick Buechner, *Speak What We Feel (Not What We Ought to Say: Reflections on Literature and Faith* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001).

[23] Buechner, *Speak What We Feel*, 134.

[24] I Corinthians 1:27-28, Revised Geneva Translation.

[25] Buechner, 137-138. See also Louis Markos's Letter from Shakespeare on "Fools" and Jack Heller's essay "Dogberry's Inscrutable Grace" both in this volume. For the power of "nothing," see Grace Tiffany's essay.

[26] Matthew 25:34-37, Revised Geneva Translation.

[27] Matthew 25:40, Revised Geneva Translation.

[28] cf. C.S. Lewis's essay, "The World's Last Night," in *The World's Last Night and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1952), 104-105. Lewis argues that in spite of his minor role, the action of the First Servant is one of the greatest examples of bravery and morality in the entire play.