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## *KING LEAR: TRAGEDY AND THE ANATOMY OF EVIL*

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HE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE FOOL IN *KING LEAR* IS ONE OF THE PLAY'S MANY oddities: a character who has grown larger and larger in stature as the play has developed is unobtrusively dispatched with a final riddling message: hearing Lear's announcement that "We'll go to supper In the morning," the Fool replies, "And I'll go to bed at noon." The reply is unwittingly prophetic, for we later learn that the Fool is indeed "put to bed at noon," at a point when much remains unresolved, when the major business of Lear's education, hitherto entrusted to the Fool, remains woefully incomplete.

The disappearance of the Fool is almost universally noticed by critics, but is only vaguely accounted for; perhaps the most cogent explanations have associated the Fool's disappearance with the imminent return of Cordelia, which is in some ways his alter ego, and who therefore makes his character redundant. I suggest, however, that the Fool's departure can be accounted for in more precise terms: the Fool is dispatched because of his inadequacy in the major business of the play, the anatomy of evil. He is replaced by Edgar who, as Poor Tom, will be the chief anatomist of the play to its bitter end.

The crucial importance of the Fool in the early scene of the play is that he posits a world that rewards reasonable and prudent behavior. For the Fool reason is an adequate guide to human behavior, and the miseries that are visited on humans are in his view the logical and predictable consequences of human folly. The opening scenes of the play indeed seem to bear out this wisdom: as Lear's predicament intensifies, it is all-too-evident that what he suffers at the hands of his daughters is of his own doing, the result of his ill-advised love-contest. Though there have been but the slightest intimations of Lear's vulnerability, the "most faint neglect of late" that Lear himself has barely noticed, the Fool is evidently aware of the dangers the future holds for his master. In his first words to Lear, he taunts him for being a Fool, in fact a fool twice over, for trusting both of his daughters:

Fool: How now, nuncle? Would I had two daughters and two coxcombs!

Lear: Why, my boy?

Fool: If I gave them all my living, I'd keep my coxcombs myself. There's mine, beg another of thy daughters. (Liv.103-07)<sup>2</sup>

Lear's division of the kingdom, the Fool suggests, was unconscionable folly; his decision to vest his daughters jointly with all his "power,/ Pre-eminence, and all the large effects/ That troop with majesty" was so egregiously foolish that it has turned his world up-side down:

When thou clov'st thy crown in the middle,  
 and gav'st away both parts,  
 thou bor'st thine ass on thy back o'er the dirt.  
 (I.iv. 157-59)  
 ...thou mad'st thy daughters thy mothers,  
 ...when  
 thou gav'st them the rod and put'st down  
 thine own  
 breeches. (I.iv. 169-70)

The Fool's jibes repeatedly taunt Lear with the absurdity of his act and the consequent absurdity of the world he has created for himself: "Thou wast a pretty fellow when thou hadst no need to care for her frowning, now thou art an O without a figure. I am better than thou art now, I am a Fool, thou art nothing?" (I.iv.190). The Fool's reiterated lesson is clear: Lear is in trouble because of a failure in wisdom, a flouting of the rules of common sense that are accessible to all. Prudence is the key to a prosperous and untroubled life, as the Fool's ditty suggests:

Have no more than thou showest, Speak less  
 than  
 thou knowest, Lend less than thou owest,  
 Ride more  
 than thou goest, Learn more than thou trow-  
 est, Set  
 less than thou throwest, Leave thy drink and  
 thy  
 whore, And keep in a' door And thou shalt  
 have  
 more Than two tens to a score. (I.iv. 116-25)

This has been described, by William Elton, as a "bourgeois ethic" reminiscent of the banalities uttered by Polonius, but I suspect that the Renaissance audience would have thought otherwise, tracking the counsels instead to a more familiar source, the Wisdom books of the Old Testament, and especially the Book of Proverbs, which offers much the same counsels of prudence as the Fool does"

He who guards his mouth protects his life; to open one's lips brings downfall. (13:13)

One man pretends to be rich, yet has  
 nothing;  
 another pretends to be poor, yet has great

wealth. (13:7)

He who spares his words is truly wise, and he who is chary of speech is a man of intelligence. (17:27)

Listen to counsel and receive instruction, that you may become wise. (19:20)

Wine is arrogant, strong drink is riotous; none who goes astray for it is wise. (20:1)



The harlot is a deep ditch, and the adulteress is a narrow pit; yes, she lies in wait like a robber, and increases the faithlessness among men. (23: 27-28)

The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is the slave of the lender. (22:7)

Let your foot be seldom in your neighbor's house,  
 lest he have more than enough of you, and hate you. (25:17)

The proverbs, in a book considered to be inspired, are notable for two reasons, both of them highly relevant to King Lear. First, they are guides to good living based not upon religious revelation, but upon the accumulated wisdom of the race. They do, to be sure, advocate ethical behavior, mandating, for example, that the rich give of their affluence to the poor, but by far the majority of the counsels concern themselves with cautions against self-destructive behavior, against the follies that jeopardize health and wealth.

Secondly, the proverbs are notable in their assurance that this world is one in which God transparently cherishes rational and virtuous behavior and decisively rebukes iniquity. The person who listens to wisdom and fears the Lord will thus prosper: "Be not wise in your own eyes, fear the Lord and turn away from evil; this will mean health for your flesh and vigor for your body" (3:7).

That confidence in the rule of reason provides the pith of the Fool's instructions to Lear. But the bitter torments undergone by the King and the Fool-Lear's

betrayal by the daughters, his banishment from the castle, the physical ravages of the storm, and, above all, the psychic anguish of having to envisage a world now grown hostile-betray the shallowness of the proverbial wisdom. It is Lear's folly, of course, that has provided the daughters with their opportunity to torment him, but as we come to know the daughters more thoroughly, we cannot but conclude that their malice is so ingrained that even the most prudent behavior could not have deterred indefinitely the eruption of malice. If not this opportunity, then another would present itself-or be created by them: in the words of Hamlet, "The cat will mew, the dog will have its day" (Ham. Vi. 22). Both Lear and the Fool at last realize that prudence offers no guarantee in a society where power and privilege hold sway:

Tremble, thou wretch,  
That has within thee undivulged crimes  
Unwhipt of justice! Hide thee, thou bloody  
hand,  
Thou perjur'd, and thou simular of virtue,  
That art incestuous! Caitiff, to pieces shake,  
That under covert and convenient seeming  
Has practic'd on man's life!

The Fool, though, is not entirely surprised by his discovery that the world has depths he has not yet fathomed, for from the beginning his comfortable rationalism has been belied by his actions, specifically by his loyalty to King Lear against his better wisdom. It is the rationalist Fool who, in his very first speech, chides Kent for following Lear, "for taking one's part that's out of favor." But the complexity of the Fool, that which gives him both appeal and strength as a dramatic character, is in evidence in a later speech, where we find both wisdoms, the wisdom of this world and the deeper wisdom of moral concern:

Let go thy hold when a great wheel  
runs down a hill lest it break thy neck with  
following; but  
the great one that goes upward, let him draw  
thee after. (II.iv.71-74)

But this cynical recognition that self-interest dominates, or should dominate, one's life is rejected by what immediately follows, the Fool's resolve to follow Lear despite everything:

That sir that serves and seeks for gain,  
And follows but for form,  
Will pack when it begins to rain,  
And leave thee in the storm.

But I will tarry, the Fool will stay,  
And let the wise man fly.  
The knave turns fool that runs away,  
The Fool no knave, perdie. (II.iv.78-85)

Reason for the Fool can explain neither the sudden hostility of the world that has turned against Lear nor the persistence of moral commitment in a world that does not reward virtue. The Fool embraces this new and bitter knowledge with what appears to be a stoic acceptance of what one can neither foresee nor control and now offers wisdom of a darker timbre:

He that has and a little tiny wit,  
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,  
Must make content with his fortunes fit,  
Though the rain it raineth every day.  
(III.iv.74-77)

With the Fool thus stymied, his rationality overwhelmed by the facts of experience, it is up to Edgar as Poor Tom to probe the depths of the situation, to reveal that Lear is crushed by evil, by the perverse will of others, rather than simply by folly.

The different worlds that Tom and the Fool inhabit are immediately evident when they first meet: the Fool's first reaction to Poor Tom is to recoil from him in horror: "Come not in here, Nuncle, here's a spirit. Help me, help me" (III.iv. 39-40). The Fool, who had stoically accepted the desperate conditions of his life with Lear, encounters a realm of experience that he cannot cope with. Like the Fool, Tom speaks of evil in the world, but in very different accents: evil for him is not simply folly, but an irruption of the supernatural into the world of man. It is the consequence of sin committed in concert with the Foul Fiend:

Take heed o' the foul fiend. Obey thy parents,  
keep thy word justly, swear not, commit not  
with man's sworn spouse set not thy heart on  
proud array. (III.iv. 78-80)

The gulf between their responses to experience gapes wide when, hearing Tom's outcry, "The foul fiend bites my back," the Fool can offer only his timid response: "He's mad that trusts in the tameness of a wolf, a horse's health, a boy's love, or a whore's oath" (III. vi.18-19). The Fool's response relates to nothing-it is essentially a non-sequitur, as the Fool is still resorting to the prudential language of the proverbs, now discredited by

by the grim facts of the play. What is needed is the semantic of diabolism introduced by Tom. The time at which the Fool actually disappears is, I think, highly suggestive. He disappears without notice shortly after Lear, struggling to understand his situation, poses the desperate question:

Then let them anatomize Regan; see what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that breeds these hard hearts?  
(III.vi.75-76)

It is a question for which the Fool has no answer, and he has, for all intents and purposes, outlived his usefulness. The question, in fact, calls for a careful anatomy of the “hard hearts” of the play, an anatomy that uncovers significant differences in the manifestations of evil in the play. It is Tom’s task to lead the way as the play goes on to perform the anatomy requested by Lear, the inquiry into the source of the evil that festers in the play’s heart of darkness. Edgar, in short, is required to enter the concepts of sin and diabolical energy into the calculus of the play.

The primary subjects of the anatomy, of course, are Goneril and Regan, but the play performs its anatomy of evil on Edmund as well. What should be noted is that the anatomy of Edmund yields results that are significantly different from those offered by the anatomy performed on Goneril and Regan—the difference lying in what might be called his pragmatic sense of evil. From his opening soliloquy, when Edmund forthrightly tells all to the audience, he is a known quantity. He lives unabashedly by the law of the jungle and will go to any length to serve his own interests. His animal ethic, hypostatized by the Nature that is his goddess, allows him to do whatever he must do to secure his own advancement:

Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed,  
And my invention thrive, Edmund the base  
Shall top th’ legitimate. I grow, I prosper,  
Now, gods, stand up for bastards. (Lii.19-22)

He is ready to betray his father to Cornwall, though he knows full well the dire consequences of that betrayal, and he is ready, in Act Five, to have Cordelia and the King killed. But, significantly, he takes no special joy in his villainy—being in this respect significantly unlike Iago, who schemes for both “sport and profit.” His reaction to the amorous advances of the sisters is characteristic: he is intrigued, even amused perhaps, by his

quandary as he mulls over his decision: “Which of them shall I take?/Both? One? Or neither?” (V i.57-58).

But it is important to note that he is not up to murdering Albany with his own hands: “Let her who would be rid of him devise/His speedy taking-off” (Vi.64-65). Conscience, to be sure, will not make a coward of Edmund, and yet, in the betrayal of his father, there is something like a twinge of guilt, or at least a recognition of the abominable character of the act:

If I find [my father] comforting the King,  
it will stuff his [Cornwall’s] suspicion more  
fully—I will persevere in my course of loyalty,  
thought the conflict be sore between that and  
my blood. (III.v. 19-22)

It is, thus, not entirely surprising to learn—in Act Five—that Edmund in his dying moments is not unrelievedly evil, being stirred to recall the writ placed on Lear and Cordelia:

I pant for life. Some good I mean to do  
Despite of mine own nature. (Viii. 242-43)

The play’s anatomy of the “hard hearts” of Goneril and Regan occurs not in the “trial scene,” where Lear intended it to take place, but in the blinding of Gloucester. The difference between Edmund’s villainy and that of the sisters is almost palpable. The anatomy requested by Lear, we should note, does take place, and in the very next scene after Lear has uttered his command, “Then let them anatomize Regan. The anatomy takes place in the blinding, where we are exposed to what must be seen as remorseless malice as the daughters of Lear, like harpies, swoop over the helpless Gloucester:

Reg. Hang him instantly!  
Gon. Pluck out his eyes. (III.vii. 4-5)



And, as Cornwall gouges out one eye of Gloucester, Regan calls for yet more satisfaction: “One eye will mock another; th’ other too” (III.vii.69). The daughters are, we know, outraged that Gloucester has given support to Lear in a situation that threatens them, but their malice is so excessive to the situation that it can almost be labeled as a motiveless malignity, an indulgence in cruelty for its own sake.

It is a cruelty compounded by one fact that is largely lost on a modern audience: that Gloucester's captors are violating (as Macbeth so notoriously does) the primal law of civilization: the bond of sacred trust between host and guest that is a necessary condition for social intercourse. It is this fundamental ethical intuition that Homer incorporates in *The Odyssey*, where the measure of one's civility is the way one treats the xenos, the stranger received as "guest-friend Nausicaa, for example, invokes this principle when, finding the stranded Odysseus, she instructs her attendants:

...this man, a wretched wanderer has come here,  
Whom we must look after, for all strangers and beggars  
Are in the care of Zeus, and a gift, even small, is friendly.  
Come, maidens, give food and drink to the stranger. (VI. 206-09)

Conversely, the guest-house relationship imposes solemn obligations upon guests, who are, as Telemachus reminds the boorish suitors of Penelope, to respect the person and property of the host:

...if your own spirit can feel the resentment,  
Get out of the halls, partake of other dinners,  
Eating your own goods, visiting each others' homes.  
But if this seems better and preferable to you,  
To use up one man's livelihood scot-free,  
Waste on. But I shall call on the eternal gods for help,  
So that Zeus may grant there to be acts of retribution...(II.138-144)

Thus, as Gloucester's captors prepare to inflict their unspeakable revenge on him, we are reminded of the circumstances that make the act especially atrocious, the fact that it is "friends," to whom he has extended hospitality, who are torturing him:

Good, my friends,  
You are my guests. Do me no foul play,  
friends.  
(III.vii. 30-31)

Moreover, the notorious

blinding scene, perhaps for viewers the most visceral and psychologically searing of all episodes in Shakespeare (beyond even the death of Cordelia), compels the audience to "see feelingly" the unnatural malice of the act: Shakespeare's version of the theater of cruelty. If we have not until this point seen that the evil in the hearts of the daughters is of a different order and more horrid than that of Edmund, the play, in this unsparing representation of torture, compels us to look upon reality without blinders. There is more to Lear's predicament than the wages of folly, and Edgar's intuitions of diabolical energies are ever more convincing.

It is Albany who finally rivets Edgar's intimations of the diabolical to the acts of the daughters. Appalled by their treatment of Lear and Gloucester, he initially denounces their acts as bestial:

What have you done?  
Tigers, not daughters, what have you perform'd? A father, and a gracious aged man,  
Whose reverence even the head-lugg'd bear would lick, Most barbarous, most degenerate, have you madded. (IV ii.40-43)

But Albany's invective does not yet take the measure of the abominations committed by Goneril and Regan, and Albany goes on to denounce Goneril in the idiom earlier introduced by Edgar:

See thyself, devil!  
Proper deformity shows not in the fiend  
So horrid as in woman. (IVii. 59-61)

Howe'er thou art a fiend, A woman's shape doth shield thee! (IV ii.66-67)



*Orsen Wells and Natasha Perry as King Lear and Cordelia, 1953*

The progress toward this kind of knowledge is Lear's destiny as well: when Lear is asked by Goneril "a little to disquantity your train" (I.iv. 249), Lear sputters, "Darkness and devils!...yet have I left a daughter," little realizing that the devils and darkness have yet to emerge in force. Lear, feeling increasingly the stings of what he perceives as injustice, rails against a world in which the rich and politically

well-placed abuse their power with impunity: “Robes and furr’d gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold! And the strong lance breaks” (IV vi.163-64). But equally prominent is his obsession with sexuality, and the “luxury” of which all are guilty and which establishes the bond between the worlds of man and of the beasts:

Die for adultery? No,  
The wren goes to’t, and the small gilded fly  
Does lecher in  
my sight. Let copulation thrive. (IV.vi. 111-13)

In a purely natural world, where the pretense of virtue is nonexistent, sexuality is guiltless. Lear has, for the moment, accepted Edmund’s reading of the world. It is hypocrisy to assume that humanity, so akin to animality, is capable of chastity, just as the beadle who lashes a whore “hotly lusts to use her in that kind! For which he [whips her]” (IV.vi.160-61). But, like Albany, Lear ultimately finds the imagery of bestiality wanting and his idiom veers from the bestial to the diabolical:

Down from the waist they are centaurs,  
Though women all above;  
But to the girdle do the gods inherit,  
Beneath is all the fiend’s; there’s hell, there’s  
darkness, There is the  
sulphurous pit, burning scalding, Stench, con-  
sumption. Fie, fie, fie,  
pah, pah! (IV.vi.123-28)

The daughters justify Lear’s hard judgment, as their common lust for Edmund draws them into a bitter rivalry; the lust that impels them will not stop at the murder of husband or sister, and Sin has decisively replaced Folly as the cause of human disorder.

Edgar is now ready to act, to precipitate the downfall of the three involved in the coils of lust. The manner in which he restores justice is especially significant, for Edgar sets aright the subverted, “upside-down” world of Lear by elaborating a series of meticulously appropriate paradoxes: brought down initially by the forged letter of Edmund, Edgar uses the letter intercepted from Goneril to incriminate the conspirators and thus allow Albany to assert himself against Goneril:

Shut your mouth Dame, Or with this paper  
shall I stople it. Hold, Sir, Thou worse than  
any name, read thine  
own evil. (V.iii.153-55)

In the same spirit of paradox, Edgar is translat-

ed by Shakespeare in a reckless anachronism from pre-Christian Britain to the High Middle Ages-to face Edmund in a trial by combat. The irony is patent: Edmund, who in his opening soliloquy rejects all customs and conventions, as meretricious, the mere “curiosity of nations,” now appeals to the unwritten code of knighthood of the Middle Ages, this most hierarchical of all times, to establish his position: he need not accept a challenge from one of unknown rank:

What safe and nicely I might well delay  
By rule of knighthood, I disdain and spurn.  
(Viii. 143-44)

The relentless paradox of the episode culminates in the victory of the meek Edgar over the strong and wily Edmund-by using precisely the means most familiar to Edmund: cunning. It is, as the exasperated Goneril points out, a classic case of “the cozener cozened.”

This is practice, Gloucester.  
By th’ law of war, thou wast not bound to  
answer An unknown  
opponent. *Thou are not vanquish’d,  
But cozened and beguiled.*  
(Viii. 150-53; emphasis mine)

The paradoxes surrounding the mortal wounding of Edmund effectively restore order to the world-in what appears to be manifestation of poetic justice. This return of order is formally signaled when Edgar unmasks and proclaims his identity:

Let’s exchange charity.  
I am no less in blood than thou art, Edmund;  
If more, the more th’ hast wrong’d me.  
My name is Edgar, and thy father’s son. The  
gods are just,  
*and of our pleasant vices  
Make instruments to plague us:  
The dark and vicious place where thee he got  
Cost him his eyes.*  
(Viii. 165-72; emphasis mine)

The location of the speech, at what appears to be the resolution of the play, grants it an impressive authority seeming to offer the final word on the significance of what has transpired. And this impression is strengthened by Edmund’s assent: “Th’ hast spoken right, ‘Tis true,/ The wheel is come full circle. I am here” (V iii.172-73). But we should not, I suggest, accept too complacently what Edgar proposes, for the play goes on to challenge Edgar’s judgment. Indded, the “just gods” who have

visited upon Gloucester the same kind of darkness as that in which he had sinned seem far too stern and forbidding to yield solace to the attentive viewer. Gloucester, nothing more than l'homme moyen sensuel, seems to pay exorbitantly for a casual adultery. But what is even more evident is that Edgar, whose penetration into the mystery of evil represents an advance over the Fool's assumption that evil is the consequence of folly, has himself a too-naïve view of the divine economy, for in seeing Gloucester's blinding as heaven-sent punishment for adultery, he is simply re-contextualizing the "common sense" of the Fool: his new calculus of evil includes the forces of supernatural evil, but it suggests that human suffering yet remains understandable—as the inexorable punishment for sin. Despite the machinations of the Foul Fiend, the world of Edgar is still, to this point, open to reason, still ordained by "the clearest gods."

Edgar is, in fact, repeating the mistake made earlier by Lear, who, after his capture by Edmund and Albany, reacts to his imprisonment by assuring Cordelia that the two "will sing like birds i' th' cage and take upon us the mystery of things, as if we were God's spies." The play suggests otherwise: that neither Lear nor Edgar is qualified to be God's spy.



The death of Cordelia bares the shallowness of Edgar's optimism that he can penetrate the secrets of divine economy. If evil cannot be understood as the consequence of folly, neither can it be understood as necessarily the consequence of sin; though the wages of sin may be detected in the fates of Cornwall, Goneril, Regan, and Edmund, we can ascribe the death of Cordelia to neither folly nor sin. Her radiant innocence has offered no refuge from the harshness of the world.

This world, then, is not, as Proverbs would have it, one where "the curse of the Lord is on the house of the wicked,/ But the dwelling of the just He blesses" (3:3). Though Edgar would cling tenaciously to that optimism, the darker Wisdom Books, Job and Ecclesiastes, are surer guides. Edgar, in presuming to know the mysteries of God's ways, has re-enacted the errors of Job's question-

ers, who are roundly chastised by the Lord for their arrogance. Edgar must, rather, follow Job in submitting to the mystery of God's dealings:

I have dealt with things I do not understand;  
things too wonderful  
for me, which I cannot know.

The tone of the play is similarly captured in Ecclesiastes, which insists upon the inscrutability of God and the futility of all human aspirations and endeavors: "Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher, vanity of vanity. All things are vanity." In this reading of the world, God is in his Heaven, but not all is right with the world. All man can do is to observe the time, to enjoy the fleeting intervals of pleasures that life offers, and resign himself to misfortune when it comes—as it inevitably will at some time or other, regardless of one's moral worth:

All this I have kept in mind and recognized;  
the just, the wise, and their deeds are in the  
hands of God. Love from hatred man cannot  
tell; both appear equally vain, in that there is  
the same lot for all, for the just and the wicked,  
for the good and the bad, for the clean and the  
unclean, for him who offers sacrifice and for  
him who does not. As it is for the good man, so  
is it for the sinner; as it is for him who swears  
rashly, so is it for him who fears an oath. *Among  
all things that happen under the sun, this is the worst,  
that things turn out the same for all. Hence the minds  
of men are filled with evil, and madness is in their  
hearts during life; and afterwards they go to the dead.*  
(Eccl. 9: 1-3; emphasis mine)

In such a world one cannot hope to find causes for suffering, and Lear, like Edgar, has it wrong throughout. Lear's attitude is clear from the beginning; in his staging of the "love-contest" intended to establish the reasons for his generosity, he would reward each daughter in proportion to the love she manifested to him. But when Cordelia's silence denies him his "cause," he responds wrathfully, "Nothing will come of nothing," thus framing a central question of the play, the role of causality in human experience.

The formula "nothing will come of nothing" is a familiar one in the ancient world, expressing the belief that the universe is infinite (as opposed to the finite universe of Christianity, created *ex nihilo*). The logical implication is that the universe is material and governed by the laws of cause and effect. Thus Lear's outrage at Cordel-

ia's rebuffs she, the favored one, had cause to love him-and his later outrage at her sisters, who likewise have, as he reminds Regan, cause to love him but are flouting the "dues of gratitude":

Thy half of the kingdom halt thou not forgot,  
Wherein I thee endowed. (II.iv. 178-79)

Regan's reply, "Good sir, to th' purpose," exposes her indifference to Lear's reasoning. Causality, it is clear, does not obtain in the moral order; gratitude cannot be created. It is a lesson, though, that Lear does not understand, as he seeks-in his agonizing disappointment-reasons for the malice of his daughters: "Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" If evil exists, thinks Lear, there must be a cause. This same presumption dictates his reaction to Cordelia when they are reunited, for the child he has spurned has reason to hate him:

I know that you do not love me, for your sisters  
Have, as I remember, done me wrong;  
You have some cause, they have not.  
(IV. vii. 73-75)

The secret that Lear cannot yet grasp is offered in Cordelia's "No cause, no cause": Love, she states, simply is, uncaused and unconditional, just as evil simply is, uncaused and beyond rational explanation. Cordelia's rejection of cause is at once her rebuttal of Lear's "Nothing will come of nothing" and of his desperate anatomy of evil, his probe into the "cause of these hard hearts."

The last, and hardest, lesson for both Lear and Edgar, both of whom have ceaselessly sought causes, is the causeless death of Cordelia. And even now Lear speaks in the language of causality demanding that the world make sense:

Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,  
And thou no breath  
at all? (Viii. 305-06).

But no answer is forthcoming-only the astounding silence of Cordelia.

The truth that transfixes us is that God has not, and will not, indulge our causal speculation, for that would be to make Him less than He is. In the death of Cordelia, Shakespeare is embodying the hard-earned

wisdom of Job, which is echoed in the language of a later thinker, Nicolai Berdyayev:

It is absolutely wrong to apply the category of causality to God and the relation between God and the world. It is suitable only to relations which belong to the phenomenal world. God is not the cause of the world any more than he is master and king, any more than he is power and might. God determines nothing. *When people speak of God as the creator of the world, they are speaking of something immeasurably more mysterious than a causal relationship.* (Emphasis mine)

After Lear's death Edgar is left to countenance the appalling mystery of things as he sees the "nothing" that Cordelia now is, and is unable to believe that something can indeed come from nothing. It is a chastened Edgar who states, "The weight of this sad time we must obey,/ Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say" (Viii.322-23), what we ought to say being, ostensibly, some pious formulation extolling the justice of the gods and outlining the reasons for what has transpired. Such a formulation would, in these harrowing circumstances, be gross impiety toward the gods, who themselves choose to remain silent.

## NOTES

1 This article is one of the posthumously published works of Rene Fortin, professor of literature at Providence College, Rhode Island. It is thanks to the efforts of Fortin's colleagues, Brian Barbour and Rodney Delasanta, that this previously unpublished essay was made available for the collection of Fortin's literary criticism, *Gaining Upon Certainty* (published by the Providence College Press; see review and advertisement at the end of this issue). Permission to reprint is gratefully acknowledged. The editor also wishes to thank professor Matthew Cuddeback for his help in arranging for this reprint.

2 All references to *King Lear* are from *The Arden Shakespeare*, ed. Kenneth Muir (London and New York: Methuen, 1987).