

Poetic Justice and the Disguises of Edgar in *King Lear**

MAURICE CHARNEY

We do not need to be reminded how inadequate Thomas Rymer's idea of poetic justice is to our conception of tragedy. It is hardly tragic at all that virtue should be rewarded and vice punished at the end of a tragedy. This goes contrary to everything postulated in Aristotle's *Poetics*. But I think it is useful to examine one outrageous claim for poetic justice by Edgar in the final scene (5.3) of *King Lear* because it impinges so strongly on our interpretation of the play.

In this scene Edgar suddenly appears "armed" (in the Folio stage direction at line 116).¹ This is his fourth disguise in the play, but it is not specified exactly how he is dressed. He is here to challenge his brother Edmund to single combat. At this point he is an anonymous figure, but the audience is most likely to recognize him as Edgar:

O know my name is lost,
By treason's tooth bare-gnawn and canker-bit;
Yet am I noble as the adversary
I come to cope withal. (119-22)

Although Edgar refuses to give his name, Edmund agrees to the match because his opponent's "outside looks so fair and warlike" (140).

*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debcharney0252.htm>>. See also Thomas Kullmann, "Poetic Injustice in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *The Tempest*," *Connotations* 25.2 (2015/2016): 209-24. <<http://www.connotations.de/debkullmann0252.htm>>.

After Edmund has been mortally wounded, Edgar reveals himself in a moralizing speech that makes great claims for the working of poetic justice in the play:

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. (167-71)

It is difficult to give much credence to Edgar's sententious and very Stoic (and by implication Christian) assertion that "[t]he gods are just" and operate in a simplified way to distribute rewards and punishments. How can Gloucester's incredibly cruel blinding be justified by his lechery in conceiving his bastard son Edmund in what Edgar wildly imagines to be a "dark and vicious place"? We hear nothing about this "dark and vicious place" anywhere else in the play. It was traditionally thought in the Renaissance that blindness was an appropriate punishment for fornication.² But Gloucester's blinding in the play is an extraordinarily cruel and deliberate act on the part of Cornwall, who cannot conceivably be punishing Gloucester for the "good sport" (1.1.22) he experienced at Edmund's begetting. Even if he is acting as God's instrument, Cornwall does not even vaguely hint at Gloucester's lechery.

Bridget Gellert Lyons offers an explanation of this in her persuasive and eloquent essay called "The Subplot as Simplification in *King Lear*": she emphasizes the fact that Edgar's didacticism owes a debt to "old-fashioned literary forms, like the morality play and the chivalric romance, through which it represents experience" (25). This is totally unlike the main action, which shows us Lear's sufferings as "heroic because they cannot be accommodated by traditional formulas, moral or literary" (25). We have no doubt that Lear is "a man / More sinned against than sinning" (3.2.59-60). After Lear and Cordelia become prisoners, her first words assert the lack of any poetic justice in this world: "We are not the first / Who with best meaning have incurred

the worst" (5.3.3-4). From the point of view of the main action of the play, there is no way we can claim that "[t]he gods are just." Edgar's moralistic formulations stand in sharp contrast with the experience of Lear and Cordelia, which hardly justifies any redemptive view of the play.

As Lyons concludes her essay:

Lear's experience is truly tragic and heroic not merely because he suffers—Gloucester suffers too—but because the literary forms that avoid tragedy are so clearly inadequate to express what he goes through. (37)

This expresses an idea of tragedy far beyond poetic justice. Lear's death is more related to Aristotle's notion of a tragic flaw, but Cordelia's death seems unmotivated and a product of a malicious fate. It clearly has no relation at all to Edgar's conviction that "[t]he gods are just." The gods are not just and they do not distribute rewards and punishments as Rymer imagines.³

The next point we need to consider is: what do Edgar's many disguises have to do with his assertion of poetic justice? I think they undercut and make ambiguous Edgar's moralistic stance. We are encouraged to think of him as a trickster figure, a little like Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. There is always a certain ambivalence about disguise in Shakespeare. We think of the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, who disguises himself as a friar to examine the state of his kingdom, but the corruption he discovers is beyond his anticipated expectations. The unsavory bed trick he proposes and oversees resembles Edgar's trick on his father. Gloucester's "life's a miracle" (4.6.55) in Edgar's avid imagination because he is made to believe that he has survived his mock-fall down the cliffs of Dover. The plot of *Measure for Measure* is like the many medieval tests of Griselda's chastity—the husband in disguise who probes his wife's faithfulness always ends up badly in a denouement he never anticipated.

There is a very explicit condemnation of disguise in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*.⁴ Viola, disguised as Cesario and a messenger from Duke Orsino, is convinced that Olivia has fallen in love with her:

Disguise, I see thou art a wickedness
 Wherein the pregnant enemy does much.
 How easy is it for the proper false
 In women's waxen hearts to set their forms! (2.2.27-30)

Satan, the "pregnant enemy," delights in disguise. Viola ends the scene utterly baffled, as we may see in her final couplet:

O Time, thou must untangle this, not I;
 It is too hard a knot for me t' untie. (40-41)

Edgar in his four disguises nowhere expresses his bafflement, but disguise nevertheless undercuts his role as a spokesman for moralistic values.

He is painfully aware of his role-playing when he first encounters his blinded father. After declaring "Poor Tom's a-cold," he says aside, "I cannot daub it further" (4.1.55) but he knows that, in order to survive, he must continue his disguise, as he concludes in another aside: "And yet I must" (57). We see in what follows his immense compassion for his father: "Bless thy sweet eyes, they bleed" (57). This does not sound like the mad imprecations of Poor Tom.

Act 4, scene six is Edgar's most important scene. Dressed as a peasant, he is now leading the blind Gloucester. As his father notices, Edgar seems different from Poor Tom:

Methinks thy voice is altered and thou speak'st
 In better phrase and matter than thou didst. (7-8)

But Edgar must continue as the Bedlam beggar in order to enact his well-conceived plot.

He attempts to convince his father that they are climbing a steep hill and that they can hear the sound of the sea. Edgar goes to great lengths to describe an imaginary scene looking down the cliffs of Dover:

Come on, sir, here's the place. Stand still: how fearful
 And dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low.
 The crows and choughs that wing the midway air

Show scarce so gross as beetles. Half-way down
 Hangs one that gathers samphire, dreadful trade;
 Methinks he seems no bigger than his head. (11-16)

In his deception of his father, Edgar proceeds as if he were directing an actor: "Give me your hand: you are now within a foot / Of th' extreme verge" (25-26). Gloucester is represented as completely convinced of the scene Edgar conjures up, and he bids adieu to his peasant companion. In the Arden edition, Foakes sees Edgar's deception as "grotesque, comic, absurd, tragic, or a combination of these" (329n 33-34), echoing the judgment of G. Wilson Knight in *The Wheel of Fire* about Gloucester's supposed fall: "The grotesque merged into the ridiculous reaches a consummation in this bathos of tragedy" (194). Both critics are painfully aware of how histrionic and unconvincing Edgar's trick seems to the audience or reader. I think the implication is how desperate the blinded father must be to believe in Poor Tom's shallow scheme.

At this point there occurs the first of Edgar's moralizing and sententious asides: "Why I do trifle thus with his despair / Is done to cure it" (33-34). He wants the audience to know exactly what he is doing and to approve of his actions. But the audience is surely as skeptical of Edgar's assuming the role of spiritual doctor as it is of the Duke's blandly asserted bed trick in *Measure for Measure*. Edgar is playing a carefully prepared trick on his father, who sincerely hopes that his fall will bring on his devoutly sought death:

O you mighty gods,
 This world I do renounce and in your sights
 Shake patiently my great affliction off. (34-36)

After he seems to fall, Gloucester is intent to end his life: "Away, and let me die" (48), but Edgar has other ideas, and he elaborates on the spiritual significance of the imaginary scene:

Hadst thou been aught but gossamer, feathers, air,
 So many fathom down precipitating,

Thou'dst shivered like an egg; but thou dost breathe,
 Hast heavy substance, bleed'st not, speak'st, art sound.
 Ten masts at each make not the altitude
 Which thou hast perpendicularly fell.
 Thy life's a miracle. (49-55)

But Gloucester still is not fully convinced; he longs for a noble, Roman suicide:

'Twas yet some comfort
 When misery could beguile the tyrant's rage
 And frustrate his proud will. (62-64)

Edgar is eager to convince his father that what he thought was a peasant was actually a fiend, a devil who tried to persuade him to commit suicide by jumping off the cliffs of Dover. His father is "happy," in the sense of fortunate (having good "hap") in escaping:

Think that the clearest gods, who make them honours
 Of men's impossibilities, have preserved thee. (73-74)

Gloucester now seems to be won over by Edgar's strenuous arguments:

Henceforth I'll bear
 Affliction till it do cry out itself
 'Enough, enough' and die. (75-76)

Even though Edgar concludes: "Bear free and patient thoughts" (80), we are not thoroughly persuaded that he has freed his father from his incipient despair; and he is indeed soon having black thoughts again.

Why does Edgar not reveal himself to his father? In an essay called "The Avoidance of Love," Stanley Cavell claims that a cruel Edgar is deliberately avoiding recognition. He faults Edgar for not letting his father know that he is alive and well, which Gloucester wishes for intensely, as in his speech before he falls: "If Edgar live, O, bless him!" (40). But I think Cavell is wrong to put such a strong emphasis on this point. He ignores Edgar's fervent purpose to prevent his father from

despairing, which seems like a very Christian intention, since despair signifies a loss of belief in God's providence. Despair is a kind of atheism. Edgar's spiritual quest overrides every other consideration.

As Michael Mooney points out, Edgar is a choric and symbolic figure who should not be interpreted psychologically. He is determined to rescue his father: "Why I do trifle thus with his despair / Is done to cure it" (33-34). Edgar is certainly aware that he is playing a dangerous game with his father, as is expressed in his use of the surprising word "trifle." I think he is painfully conscious of the fact that he cannot openly reveal his identity and also pursue his spiritual quest. Once he revealed himself this quest would most likely end.

At the end of Act 4, scene six, after the moving encounter of the mad Lear and the blind Gloucester, Edgar appears again in another peasant disguise. Gloucester reaffirms his freedom from despair: "Let not my worser spirit tempt me again / To die before you ['you ever gentle gods'] please" (4.6.213-15). Edgar explains, in neutral terms, his new persona: he is

A most poor man, made tame to fortune's blows,
Who, by the art of known and feeling sorrows,
Am pregnant to good pity. Give me your hand;
I'll lead you to some biding [dwelling]. (217-20)

When Oswald enters and is ready to slay Gloucester, Edgar shifts into a heavy, West Country dialect: "Ch'ill pick your teeth, zir. Come, no matter for your foins [thrusts]" (240-41). He not only kills Oswald but he also shifts back into standard English. Edgar seems to delight in displaying his histrionic talents. Note that he addresses Gloucester as "father" (250, 281) without specifically acknowledging that he is his son. The scene ends with Edgar vowing to bestow his father "with a friend" (281).

In Act 5, scene two Edgar is still dressed as a peasant as he leads his father away from the battlefield. Now that Lear has lost the battle, Gloucester is despairing again: "a man may rot even here" (8), but Edgar insists on cheering him up:

What, in ill thoughts again? Men must endure
 Their going hence even as their coming hither.
 Ripeness is all. Come on. (9-11)

Gloucester's answer lacks any passionate conviction: "And that's true too" (11). It is not part of Edgar's role to explain why "Men must endure / Their going hence even as their coming hither," but it sounds like a Christian (or possibly Stoic) commonplace.

In the Arden edition, Foakes explains in a note why this passage is so out of place in this context: "Edgar's moralizing seems hardly adequate to the nature of the action, and is undercut by the next scene" (364n11). Edgar is here, as elsewhere, too intent on offering moral commentaries on the action that do not help the audience understand what is actually happening. We feel that throughout the play the role of Edgar presents us with difficulties. For all his seemingly good intentions, he still seems to us a trickster, like Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, whom we cannot take literally. Why "ripeness," as if the blinding of Gloucester was necessary in order to him to become fully mature? Elton in *King Lear and the Gods* cites Jaques's speech about Touchstone, whom he quotes: "And so, from hour to hour, we ripe and ripe, / And then, from hour to hour, we rot and rot" (*As You Like It* 2.7.26-27). This sounds faintly ridiculous rather than philosophical and anticipates the cynical humor of Jaques's Seven Ages of Man speech shortly after in this scene.

We have already discussed Edgar's last disguise in the final scene of the play (5.3) when he moralizes on how "The gods are just" (5.3.168). In an eloquent new book called *Poor Tom: Living King Lear* (2014), Simon Palfrey presents an apocalyptic view of Edgar, especially in his disguise as Poor Tom. He asserts unequivocally: "The Edgar-role bears the burden of the play" (251). In a series of philosophical, theological, and political interludes (see 6), Palfrey expatiates on the centrality of Poor Tom to our understanding of the play. His approach is primarily philosophical in the sense that the author is not concerned with the events of the action. He proceeds at a very high level of generalization about the play with Edgar in his various guises as a

projection of Shakespeare himself.⁵ As he explains in the Afterword, his book is a personal matter with him: “The true sources of *Poor Tom* are not really scholarly or theatrical. The book has grown from somewhere inside, from fears and fascinations that I still don’t fully understand” (257). That is perhaps why Palfrey has so very little to say about King Lear or any of the other characters in the play.

Not being as philosophically inclined as Palfrey, I feel hesitant to ask why he almost completely ignores the fact that Poor Tom is a role that Edgar, spurred on mercilessly by Edmund’s concocted letter, assumes in order to save himself from the wrath of his father and his own probable death. We know, of course, that there is no character named Poor Tom in the play. Edgar ingeniously invents the role of Poor Tom from abundant hints in Samuel Harsnett’s *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (1603),⁶ a role which Edgar enacts with great histrionic vigor, perhaps even overacts. We need to be reminded that, in the course of the action, Edgar also plays three other roles: the peasant who leads Gloucester to Dover Cliffs, the rustic (with a rich West Country/Somersetshire-accent) who leads Gloucester away from Dover Cliffs and kills Oswald, and, finally, the poor, unrecognizable, armed Edgar who challenges his brother to single combat and eventually kills him.

Palfrey’s book is so eloquent and wide-ranging that it is hard to argue with its assumptions. But it is also difficult to see how Edgar as a character can be at the heart of the play. Palfrey is so enamored with Edgar as Poor Tom that Lear and Cordelia and Kent are almost made to disappear. Basically, I think we have two actions in *King Lear* that are very different from each other. As Lyons so well observes, the subplot of the play is moralistic and didactic, with a strong resemblance to morality plays and medieval romances. Here poetic justice has an important function in arguing against Gloucester’s despair. As Edgar reports it, his father’s end is a happy and fortunate one:

I asked his blessing and from first to last
Told him our pilgrimage. But his flawed heart,
Alack, too weak the conflict to support,

'Twi'xt two extremes of passion, joy and grief,
Burst smilingly. (5.3.194-98)

But the hearts of Lear and Cordelia do not burst smilingly. The main action of the play has no relation to morality plays or medieval romances. There is no easy resolution in Lear's "Howl, howl, howl, howl!" (255) nor in his "Never, never, never, never, never" (307) to mark the death of Cordelia. His life is not a miracle as Edgar claims that Gloucester's is. The main and the subplot are set against each other with no possibility of reconciliation. Perhaps this intense duality of the two actions defines the essential ambiguity of *King Lear*.

Rutgers University
New Brunswick, NJ

NOTES

¹*King Lear* is quoted from the Arden edition, third series, ed. by R. A. Foakes. All other quotations from Shakespeare are from the individual volumes of *The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare*, ed. by Sylvan Barnet.

²See many passing references in William R. Elton's *King Lear and the Gods*.

³See Samuel Johnson's comment on the ending of the play: "A play in which the wicked prosper, and the virtuous miscarry, may doubtless be good, because it is a just representation of the common events of human life: but since all reasonable beings naturally love justice, I cannot easily be persuaded, that the observation of justice makes a play worse; or, that if other excellencies are equal, the audience will not always rise better pleased from the final triumph of persecuted virtue" (704).

⁴In *Twelfth Night*, the condemnation is, however, comical and includes a metareflection on play acting: Viola, acted by a boy, is a young woman on stage, who "disguises" as a young man. Disguise, in this comedy, leads to confusion which is eventually happily resolved.

⁵See, e.g., Palfrey's claim that Edgar is "deeply inward with Shakespeare's imagination" (10).

⁶See Brownlow; Elton (89-93); Skura (134-41 and n20); and Greenblatt (esp. ch. 4).

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