

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



The Passion of Lear

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This essay explores the variety of means – such as feeling, appetite, and reason – by which characters in *King Lear* respond to their harshly turbulent world in which power struggles threaten and extinguish humane impulses. By appearing to signify their opposition to human malevolence, characters’ feelings have misled readers about their value. For example, swayed by the ‘touching’ aspect of Cordelia’s impassioned reunion with Lear, Marguerite Tassi, Arthur Kirsch, and Wendell Berry overlook the harmfulness of Cordelia’s pity.¹ Geoffrey Aggeler, Danielle St. Hilaire, and Penelope Geng offer more extensive defenses of pity in the play to which I likewise object.²

Shakespeare uses Stoicism to criticize his Christian society. In applying a Christian lens to praise Cordelia’s feelings toward Lear during their reunion, Berry, though, seems to think that Shakespeare uses Christianity to criticize Stoicism: ‘Cordelia’s lamentation over her father in 4.6, “and wast thou fain, poor father, / To hovel thee with swine and rogues forlorn” recalls the Prodigal Son who squandered his inheritance’.³ Berry perceives the Christian component of Cordelia’s forgiveness in her ‘lamentation’, in the feeling of sorrow and pity for Lear that moves her to forgive Lear uncritically whereby

¹ See Marguerite A. Tassi, ‘The Avenging Daughter in King Lear’, in *Revenge and Gender in Classical, Medieval, and Renaissance Literature*, ed. by Lesel Dawson and Fiona McHardy (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 111-21 (p. 118); Arthur Kirsch, “‘Twixt Two Extremes of Passion, Joy and Grief’: Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and Last Plays’, *The Yale Review* 103. 1 (2015) 26-47 (pp. 30-1); and Wendell Berry, ‘The Uses of Adversity’, *The Sewanee review* 115. 2 (2007), 211–38 (p. 233).

² Geoffrey Aggeler, ‘Good Pity in *King Lear*, the Progress of Edgar’, *Neophilologus* 77.2 (1993), 321–31; Danielle St. Hilaire, ‘Pity and the Failures of Justice in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*’, *Modern Philology* 113.4 (2016), 482–506; Penelope Geng, *Communal Justice in Shakespeare’s England: Drama, Law, and Emotion* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), pp. 96-121.

³ Berry, 233.

she, like the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, mimics God's gracefulness. However, Berry's positive assessment of Cordelia's forgiveness, to which her emotions compel her, joins other accounts of their reunion in overlooking the play's regard for Seneca's condemnation of pity and of irrational behavior in general.

The play's understanding of what is morally good or bad aligns with Stoic philosophy, as part of which Seneca condemns impediments to rational thought and action. Pity is one such impediment that affects characters in *King Lear*. Pity is a 'vice of the mind', a 'distress caused by the impression of others' unhappiness, or a sadness brought on by the woes of others', that 'blunts our thoughts' and is 'unsuited... to figuring out what's helpful... and to calculating what's fair'.⁴ For Seneca, by diminishing one's capacity to think clearly, pity inhibits one from generating standards of fairness that could be useful – also for society as a whole – to the attainment of justice, hinders individuals from acting in a way that is useful to the pitied person, and prevents them from perceiving the harmfulness of their pity.

Cordelia's pity for Lear implies her disapproval of her sisters' callous treatment of him and therefore seems to position her as the morally supportable daughter – indeed, readers of the play have always tended to join Lear in adoring Cordelia. Pity seems to confirm its moral worth by formulating a moral evaluation that helps motivate Cordelia to alleviate Lear's suffering while allowing her to understand the extent of his experiences. However, her pity emasculates her father and threatens to conceal its emasculating effect precisely by appearing as a morally justified and reasonable response to his suffering. The success of Cordelia's endeavor to help her father will depend on her and Lear's ability to recognize the threat that her pity poses to his manhood.

Characters in *King Lear* repeatedly tie feeling to gender,⁵ thus incorporating questions of femininity and masculinity into the conversation within the play about what is morally good or bad. Lear, for example, in dialogue with Goneril, foreshadows and helps make sense of his resistance to Cordelia's pity by lamenting her ability to threaten his sense of his masculinity: 'That thou hast power to shake my manhood thus' (1.4.313).⁶ Because he finds that manliness supports his pursuit of power, he resists feelings such as grief,

⁴ Seneca, *On Clemency*, in *Anger, Mercy, Revenge*, trans. by Robert A. Kaster and Martha C. Nussbaum (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 2.4.4, 2.5.4, 2.5.5, and 2.6.1. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and will be cited parenthetically.

⁵ Throughout this essay, I tie certain emotions to masculinity or femininity in order to reflect classical and early modern cultural associations that shape what *King Lear* has to say about emotions.

⁶ All quotations from the play are taken from *King Lear*, ed. by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015). Subsequent quotations are cited parenthetically.

which he regards as feminine and therefore deems incompatible with his manhood: ‘Let not women’s weapons, water drops, / Stain my man’s cheeks’ (2.4.318-19).⁷ Lear’s view of what is good for himself accords with his understanding of manhood. *King Lear* interrogates the value of feelings by having Lear, for example, encourage the prospect that questions of good and bad are contingent upon an individual’s masculinity or femininity.

In alignment with Seneca, *King Lear* illustrates the feminizing influence of the passions, which include anger, grief, and pity. Feminization is problematic because one’s masculinity, in the sense that Seneca idealizes it in opposition to femininity, is a source of virtue. One’s masculinity enables one to be just and otherwise reasonable and to execute one’s authority fairly. In *King Lear*, it is necessary to cling to one’s masculinity, as Regan and Goneril do when they rule over Lear and as the play’s survivors do in order to promote order and community. For Seneca, women, too, can and should use reason to avoid the weaknesses of femininity and adopt virtues, such as self-control, which he conceived as masculine. For example, he denies that his mother can use her ‘womanhood’ as an excuse to ‘justify’ her ‘grief’. He urges his mother to avoid ‘female tears’ and ‘female vices’ and, instead, to cling to her ‘reason’ by avoiding the ‘foolish self-indulgence’ of endless grief.⁸ As Craig Williams observes, Seneca held that ‘*virtus* is fundamentally a man’s rather than a woman’s quality’.⁹ Shakespeare uses, for example, his gendered dramatization of Lear’s failure to resist grief to indicate his play’s adoption of Seneca’s link between *virtus* and masculinity. In order to consider the play’s response to alternatives to Stoicism as an ideological arbiter of what is good or bad, I also examine Epicureanism as well as illustrations of masculinity or femininity composed by Homer, Sallust, and Plato.

In my view, because they misread or do not consider the significance of gender and Stoicism to the play’s development, critics¹⁰ tend to mischaracterize Lear, other

⁷ Much in the way that early modern writers likened the beard to a weapon, casting it as a man’s ‘last line of defense against effeminization’, Lear views tears as feminine weapons that threaten his manhood; see Will Fisher, ‘The Renaissance Beard: Masculinity in Early Modern England’, *Renaissance Quarterly* 54.1 (2001), 155–87 (p. 173).

⁸ Seneca, *Consolation to Helvia*, trans. by Gareth D. Williams, in *Hardship and Happiness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 16.5 and 16.1.

⁹ Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 133.

¹⁰ Recent ones include Richard Strier, *The Unrepentant Renaissance: From Petrarch to Shakespeare to Milton* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), and Christina Gutierrez-Dennehy, “‘Dost Thou Call Me Fool’: Staging Lear’s Madness for Twenty-First-Century Audiences”, *Shakespeare Bulletin* 38.2 (2020), 165-84.

characters, and their interactions with each other. These critics are, I believe, consequently misled in their endeavors to sympathize with or withhold sympathy from various characters, to find justification for or locate grounds for indignation in different events, and to discern moral implications from the play's trajectory. These moral implications especially concern the value of feelings, which are able to shape the ways in which characters understand and react to their experiences.

My argument will be threefold. One, I assert that Lear does not come to embrace pity, because he finds that pity emasculates and disempowers pitiers and objects of pity, because receiving and offering pity would contradict his sense of self, and because he endorses the pursuit of justice and power through violence. Two, I claim that *King Lear* rejects pity on moral and practical grounds, suggesting that pity lacks moral worth, is harmful to oneself and others, and is at best dangerous to rely on as a force that should sustain and support a man or woman's acquisition of power and justice. Three, I find that, instead, the play endorses the pursuit of power and justice as long as primarily rational thinking drives the pursuit. The play invites common criticism of Stoicism by having Lear accuse his opponents of being heartless (e.g., 5.3.308) and by enticing readers to like Cordelia for pitying Lear. *King Lear* endorses Stoicism by emphasizing the role of masculinity and reason, to the exclusion of passions and appetites, in obtaining justice and creating a harmonic, ordered society with which Lear, Cordelia, and the other characters who die prove incompatible.

Lear's Passions; Regan and Goneril's Fitness to Rule

As will also be evident when Kent, Edgar, and Cordelia's pity and his self-pity emasculate him, Lear requires power to maintain his sense of being a man. Despite the extent of ownership that he seeks to confer upon his daughters by dividing his kingdom among them and in contradiction to Jim Casey's claim that Lear 'chooses' the role of 'effeminized weakness', I agree with John McLaughlin that Lear endeavors to retain 'the personal powers he fears are slipping away'.¹¹ Lear devises a love contest whereby his daughters must express their affection for him in order to receive their part of the kingdom. This contest positions Lear as a figure above those dependent on his handouts. Lear desires to receive their gratitude and affection, which he wants to use to consolidate his personal power over them.

¹¹ Jim Casey, 'Shaken Manhood: Age, Power, and Masculinity in Shakespeare', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)* 20.2 (2014), 11–31 (p. 21); John McLaughlin, 'The Dynamics of Power in *King Lear*: An Adlerian Interpretation', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 29.1 (1978), 37–43 (p. 37).

However, by having this contest initiate a power struggle between Lear and Goneril and Regan, *King Lear* raises the prospect that personal affection and pursuit of power are mutually incompatible within a given relationship. More definitively, Lear's desire for power corrupts his paternal affection in that he reduces this affection to an instrument of his paternal authority, which he tries to reinforce in a way that opens it to attacks from Regan and Goneril.

Lear has already succumbed to passions at the expense of his reason. His vainly perceived need to receive flattery from his daughters, to have them constrain their articulations to accommodate his demands, deafens him to Cordelia's logic – she argues, 'Why have my sisters husbands if they say / They love you all?' (1.1.109-110). Lear's ire toward Cordelia is logically consistent with his demand for flattery, but his stubborn refusal to transcend the idiosyncrasy of his logic vindicates Cordelia's frustration with the lack of logical basis for his behavior. Lear's passions inhibit him from determining adequately reasonable standards of fairness that could be useful to the attainment of just outcomes.

Goneril and Regan criticize Lear's reasoning ability by highlighting his old age. Regan attributes to 'the infirmity of his age' (1.1.339) the 'poor judgement' (1.1.337) that Goneril observed in Lear when he disowned his favorite daughter who genuinely loves him. Matthew Harkins believes that Regan and Goneril's observations are disingenuous because they compose a strategy to force Lear 'into the relatively impotent role of a man in his second childhood or dotage'.¹² While Regan and Goneril's criticism underpins their burgeoning authority, Harkins is also uncritically repeating a self-serving claim of Lear's that they 'told me I had the white hairs in my beard ere the black ones were there' (4.6.116-17). The fact that they, as Stephen Reid observes,¹³ assess Lear without love or hatred and, despite their awareness of his preference for Cordelia, show no emotion in response to Lear disowning her makes them more believable.¹⁴ Moreover, even Lear's

¹² Matthew Harkins, 'The Politics of Old Age in Shakespeare's *King Lear*' *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 18.1 (2018) 1–28 (p. 5). Likewise, Cordelia's later denial that Lear is a 'dotard who has slipped into terminal decline' is motivated by her 'self-interest', her 'desire to restore Lear' (19). While I, like Harkins, probe the three sisters' ulterior motives, my consideration of Lear's irrationality and pursuit of power prevents my account of Lear's daughters from being as easily cynical.

¹³ Stephen Reid, 'In Defense of Goneril and Regan', *American Imago* 27.3 (1970), 226-44. Recognizing that critics tend to overstate Regan and Goneril's villainy, John J. Norton offers a more recent but briefer defense of them; see John J. Norton, 'New Directions: *King Lear* and Protestantism', in *King Lear: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Andrew Hiscock and Lisa Hopkins (London: Continuum, 2011), pp. 138–55 (pp. 151-2). Unlike Norton's, my account of Regan and Goneril's fairness also considers their advanced rationality in broader terms of justice and fitness to rule.

¹⁴ Reid, 227.

loyal followers perceive the irrationality of his behavior. Kent, for example, speaks with ‘plainness’ (1.1.165) in order to contrast his mental condition, which permits plain and composed thought undistorted by emotion, with Lear’s. Kent emphasizes his composure and rationality in order to vindicate his ‘judgment’ (1.1.170), which Lear wants to discredit without hearing, that Cordelia loves Lear. Conversely, Kent finds that ‘Lear is mad’ (1.1.163) in that Lear has succumbed to a furious ‘rashness’ (1.1.169) that distorts his judgment.¹⁵ Lear, therefore, only requires Regan and Goneril to assist him into dotage insofar as their acquisition of power reflects and amplifies his preexisting cognitive decay.

The decaying acuity of Lear’s reason evident in his lessened ability to defend his interests through sound decision-making feminizes him insofar as reason is coded masculine in Stoicism. As C.E. Manning notes on the basis of Seneca’s imposition of the ‘adjective *muliebris* on moral failings’, for Seneca, ‘To give way to the passions was considered particularly woman-like’ (Manning 171). According to Seneca, one remains obedient to reason by resisting the passions, by refusing to affirm and allow oneself to be compelled by an initial ‘mental jolt’, such as that ‘produced by the impression of an injury’ (*On Anger* 2.3.5), to act. The passions, which include anger and grief, preclude rulers from submitting their impulses to reason’s restraint once they have surrendered themselves to them.¹⁶ As John Guy notes, it was commonly understood in Shakespeare’s England that a counselor’s role was to assist the ruler in ‘curbing human passions and mitigating judgements’, which would help keep ‘order’ in the kingdom from degenerating into ‘chaos’.¹⁷ Lear’s dismissal of Kent stresses the victory of his passions over his reason, confirms his inability to acknowledge genuine loyalty, and prefigures the violent chaos of his deteriorating state of mind. Because they preclude fair and reasonable decisions, Lear’s passions create disorder both within and outside himself.

Lear succumbs to passion as anger overcomes him and he weeps. Strier contends that *King Lear* endorses anger because Lear uses it to cultivate his masculinity.¹⁸ However, I

¹⁵ I believe that Hanh Bui is mistaken in claiming that Lear’s ‘weakness’ is not ‘a cognitive one’, because she incorrectly denies that Kent doubts Lear’s ‘mental fitness’; see Hanh Bui, ‘*King Lear* and the Duty to Die’, *Renaissance Drama* 49.2 (2021), 125–53 (p. 136).

¹⁶ Following Seneca (*On Anger* 1.4.3; *On Anger* 1.5.2), Robert Miola notes, for example, the ‘physical expressions’ of anger’s irrationality evident in Lear beating his head at a gate as a form of self-punishment for his treatment of Cordelia; see 1.4.284 in Robert Miola, *Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy: The Influence of Seneca* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 153.

¹⁷ John Guy, ‘The Rhetoric of Counsel in Early Modern England’, in *Tudor Political Culture*, ed. by Dale Hoak (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 292–311 (p. 293); quoted in “‘The Marks of Sovereignty’: The Division of the Kingdom and the Division of the Mind in *King Lear*”, *Pacific Coast Philology* 46 (2011), 13–27 (p. 21).

¹⁸ Strier, p. 50.

find that this viewpoint overlooks the emasculating context in which Lear's anger forms. Two lines after Lear complains to Goneril, in response to her dismissing 50 of his followers, '[t]hat thou hast power to shake my manhood thus' (1.4.313), he curses her: 'Blasts and fogs upon thee' (1.4.315). Lear's anger only confirms and contributes to his emasculation because it expresses his impotence – pertinently to Lear, Seneca judges that '[r]aging in anger is womanish' (*On Clemency* 1.5.5) because it implies a position of inferiority. Directly before cursing Goneril, Lear calls attention to his 'hot tears' (1.4.314), which indicate a commingling of anger and grief because anger is hot¹⁹ while grief vocalizes itself in tears. That he seamlessly alternates between anger and grief and displays both simultaneously reflects their relatedness. The femininity of weeping thus reinforces the feminine character of his anger.

The disempowered Lear impulsively and irrationally attempts to regain his sense of his masculinity. In threatening to 'pluck ... out' his eyes if 'they' should weep (1.4.319), Lear uses anger to regain a sense of control. Because he cannot control his daughters, he seeks to feel like a man, like a masculine ruler, by threatening himself in order to restrain his feminine emotions. He addresses specifically his eyes instead of himself – as if his eyes were weeping on their own – in order to disassociate himself from the feminine emotions, such as grief, which imperil his sense of himself as a man.²⁰ However, his anger blinds him to the connection that he had conceived between his identity and his eyes: 'This is not Lear / ... Where are his eyes?' (1.4.231-3). By approaching the decision to inflict irreversible harm upon himself – to destroy his hope to see himself again as Lear – Lear illustrates anger's destructive potential and the danger of the Homeric man's inclination to respond violently to his grief.²¹ In demonstration of Seneca's rationale for characterizing anger as a form of 'madness' (*On Anger* 1.1.2), Lear's development of anger actually becomes an obstacle to his self-control²² and, in this way, in the sense that self-control is a kind of authority over oneself, further hinders his own authority as well as, relatedly, his ability to maintain order within himself.

¹⁹ Anger resembles a 'hasty spark' in *Julius Caesar*.

²⁰ As Neo-Stoic Pierre Charron emphasizes in 1601, a man who weeps 'prostitute[s] his own manhood', loses his rational function, violates nature by disfiguring what nature has made beautiful, and makes himself a 'spectacle of pity'; *Of Wisdome Three Bookes Written in French by Peter Charron... Translated by Samson Lennard* (London, 1670), p. 89.

²¹ Achilles, for example, feels he cannot participate 'in the world of men' (*Iliad* 18.106) unless he finally joins the war in order to kill Hector for taking away 'the man I loved beyond all other comrades' (*Iliad* 18.95). Homer, *The Iliad* (London: Penguin Classics, 1998).

²² As Seneca writes, 'Anger is a brief madness: for it's no less lacking in self-control' (*On Anger* 1.1.2).

Lear's loss of authority nourishes the development of feminine emotions in him. In defiance of his expectation that his daughters will obey him, Regan and Goneril expect him to believe that he must be an 'obedient father' (1.4.242). His inability to bend them to his will, as when he finds Kent in the stocks, coincides with his observation of the *hysterica passio*: 'this mother swells up toward my heart!' (2.4.62). Lear's disbelief, produced by experiences that upend his expectations, contributes to his suffering and to the growth of his feminine passions. Lear's desire for power and authority, which will sustain him until he dies, magnifies the emotional potency of this disbelief.

Lear's expectation that, as when he divides his kingdom, he will be 'entertained with that ceremonious affection as you were wont' (1.4.58-9), that he will receive quantifiable, visible, or audible exhibitions of favor, articulates the sense of power that he derives from being a man, a royal and paternal figure. This expectation likewise makes him 'false persuaded / I had daughters' (1.4.240-1) because his daughters do not behave like grateful women and therefore challenge his understanding of what a daughter is. His inability to find harmony between the world outside him and his concepts of man, woman, father, and daughter characterizes his estrangement from reality. Because his reason cannot process events that challenge his deeply rooted expectations, this estrangement voices itself in expressions of deteriorated rationality.

I take issue with Gutierrez-Dennehy's objection to contending that Lear's madness 'results from ... a loss of masculinity'.²³ According to Gutierrez-Dennehy, this contention amounts to searching for a 'singular understanding of Lear's madness', the existence of which she denies.²⁴ In my view, Lear's diminished ability to feel like a man – which is a consequence of his feminine emotions and his loss of power – affects his descent into madness because, in violating his self-image as an authoritative, paternal ruler, it inhibits him from adapting to and coping with the reality that he inhabits as an abused and impotent figure. Unlike Gutierrez-Dennehy, I believe that Lear's loss of his sense of being a man, as an explanation for his madness, does satisfyingly 'explain the intricacies of Lear's interiority'.²⁵ It informs the fragmentation of his sense of self, confuses his sense of how he may conceive himself in relation to other people, and destabilizes his understanding of his power to assert himself and obtain what he would consider justice. I believe that Gutierrez-Dennehy's criticism of gender-based analyses of Lear's madness

²³ Gutierrez-Dennehy, 172.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid, 173.

reflects her underappreciation of the fundamentality of gender²⁶ to Lear's disintegrating sense of self and to the aspects of his power struggle that disturb him.

While Lear's grief-laden fall from power may arouse sympathy in those who forget his banishment of Cordelia among other sins, Lear's loss of rational ability must help justify Regan and Goneril's political ascent. Regan and Goneril's rational assessments – evident in their focus on justifying their activity by indicating its 'ground' and 'wholesome end' (2.4.161) – contrast with Lear's emotional judgments, which are preposterous in accord with Seneca's emphasis on a ruler's inability, when impelled by anger, to behave justly (e.g., *On Anger* 1.1.2). For example, Because Lear is enraged by his counselor's placement in the stocks, which affects him as proof of his impotence and of his diminished ability to command reverence, he judges Kent's treatment to be 'worse than murder' (2.4.26-7). Lear's enraged sense that he has been personally insulted obscures his perception of murder's wrongness and prevents him from acknowledging that Kent provoked his punishment by beating the social-climber Oswald. Lear's inability to assess events and people objectively renders him unfit to judge as a ruler. His persistent expressions of feeling – as when he responds tellingly to Regan's reasoning in 2.4.161 with 'curses' (2.4.163) analogous in their compulsiveness to the bestial 'wrath' (1.1.136) that deterred him from considering Kent's supplications in Cordelia's favor – and his lack of deliberation and strategy suggest the primary influence of irrational forces such as rage on his thoughts and actions.

Given the contrasting ability of Goneril and Regan and Lear to make sound judgments, I find St. Hilaire and Geng mistaken in their accounts of justice in the play. St. Hilaire claims that *King Lear* endorses Lear's criticism of justice – Lear suggests that justice is arbitrary, because he reduces it to questions of enforcement and authority by claiming that it 'is bound up inextricably with the violence of hierarchy'.²⁷ Complementing St. Hilaire, Geng claims that the play legitimizes Lear's opposition to Regan and Goneril's conception of justice. Geng alleges that, by pitying dispossessed 'wretches' (3.4.39) neglected by his more powerful daughters, Lear contributes to 'political repair' and indicates 'the self-governing power of the community', the community formed by those who find fellowship with each other by witnessing their suffering.²⁸ Supposedly, by means of their pity, these witnesses have gained access to truths about what is just or

²⁶ Likewise, for example, while she astutely casts 'the Fool as a gauge of Lear's madness' (176), she overlooks the Fool's emphasis on gender, as evident in his observations of the power that Lear's daughters exercise over Lear: 'Which they will make an obedient father' (1.4.242).

²⁷ St. Hilaire, 485.

²⁸ Geng, pp. 109, 120-1.

unjust. Because feelings such as pity illuminate these truths, they help justify ‘political resistance against Cornwall, Regan, and Goneril’s authority’.²⁹ Geng’s account appears most plausible when the First Servant feels compelled to combat Cornwall, Regan, and Goneril’s cruelty in Act 3. However, one cannot discern moral truths by considering feelings. Privileging one character’s feelings, over those of another, as arbiters of moral truth constitutes an act of reasoned evaluation. Feelings can only happen to seem to illuminate moral truths by aligning coincidentally with the judgements of reason. I find that the accounts of justice formulated by Geng and St. Hilaire are insufficiently critical of Lear – and, therefore, underestimate the play’s sophistication – whose viewpoint of justice is biased by the deterioration of his own reason in that he denies a rational basis for justice in accordance with his own inability to pursue justice rationally. Their accounts would benefit from appreciating the play’s regard for Seneca’s belief that one must be rational in order to be just.

In contradiction to Geng, I hold that Lear’s conception of justice is incompatible with the play’s Stoic resolution. In response to Goneril’s complaints about his retinue, Lear insists that she is lying, because his ‘train are men of choice ... parts’ (1.4.275). The fact that, after Goneril complains in 1.3.1 that Lear hit her gentleman for reprimanding his Fool, Lear himself strikes Oswald in 1.4 and later rewards Kent for doing so indicates two competing conceptions of justice.³⁰ Regan and Goneril assess situations honestly and respond reasonably to them, whereas Lear, resembling Homeric men who rely on impulsive exhibitions of violence to satisfy their rage and combat their sense of shame, promotes unreasoned violence. Lear expects his personal authority and his feelings – such as the personal pride that he anchors in the size of his retinue – to determine whether ‘thou liest’ (1.4.274) and to justify the privilege that he reserves for himself and his retinue. The play does not endorse Lear’s conception of justice, because of the disorder, akin to a ‘riotous inn’ (1.4.251), to which his inflated entitlement leads.³¹ This disorder illustrates

²⁹ Ibid, p. 109.

³⁰ Introduction to William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. by R.A. Foakes 1–151. (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2019), pp. 1-151 (p. 65).

³¹ Goneril inaccurately describes the ‘Men so disordered, so debauched ... / That this our court, infected with their manners, / Shows like a riotous inn’ (1.4.249-251) as ‘Epicurism’ (1.4.251). Whereas Epicurus preaches restraint, contentment with less and moderation of our desires (*Letter to Menoecus* 130-131), Goneril repeatedly accuses Lear of encouraging (1.4.213-214) forms of excess. The unrestrained ‘lust’ (1.4.251) that Lear allows his ‘men of choice and rarest parts’ (1.4.275), which creates a resemblance to ‘a tavern or a brothel’ (1.4.252), allies him with Callicles. Callicles asserts that one ought to allow others to avoid restraining their appetites and that only the rare ‘competent’ people can devote themselves to satisfying them (*Gorgias* 491e-492a). The extent of space that Plato allows for Callicles to speak and Socrates to challenge Callicles evinces Plato’s concern about the popularity of Callicles’ conception of ‘the

the consequences of Lear's hypocrisy – he seems to think that, for example, only he and his followers are above reproof – which permits him and his followers to act presumptuously without expecting reproof. His hypocrisy is thus itself a kind of disorder because it institutes an asymmetry of permitted behavior. Given Lear's irrational conception of justice, which is nourished by his passions and appetites, his death will be necessary so that the play may end by cultivating an ordered community sustained by rational men.³²

Lear's eroding ability to behave justly, to satisfy rationally determined standards of justice, crucially reflects his development as a character and, relatedly, comments on his fitness to rule relative to that of his two opponents. While Regan and Goneril's lack of mercy may make them appear less likable particularly from a Christian perspective, mercy is not always justified. While mercy may serve 'more peaceful ends' (*On Clemency* 1.5.4), Regan and Goneril pursue peace by dismissing Lear's rowdy retinue. Thus, what Lear could have construed as a product of mercy³³ – their permission to maintain his retinue – would not have been well-reasoned. Because it fosters their rational behavior, their 'even-tempered' disposition, which Seneca's 'wise man' (*On Anger* 2.10.7) possesses and which averts pity as well as other emotional obstacles to well-reasoned decisions, promotes both the reader's support of their empowerment at Lear's expense and the moral defensibility of their rational conception of what is just and fair.

One might contend that, for Regan and Goneril, being rational is a tactic rather than an attribute. While their power over Lear remains incipient and they thus want to show that they deserve this power, they visibly emphasize their strength in the area—exercising reason—where they perceive Lear to be weak. Their calculated behavior, however, consists with the rationality that they manifest even when they lack any incentive to demonstrate their reasoning ability, such as when they converse privately with each other. For example, privately, they derive cogent claims about Lear's irrationality from

man who'll live correctly' (*Gorgias* 491e). See Epicurus, *The Art of Happiness* (London: Penguin Classics, 2012); Plato, *Gorgias* in *Complete Works*, ed. by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), pp. 791-869.

³² In alignment with *King Lear*, Sallust identifies 'excessive license' (*Cataline's Conspiracy* 11.5) and absence of 'moderation' (*Cataline's Conspiracy* 12.3) as sources of disorder and evidence for departure from 'manly virtue' (*Cataline's Conspiracy* 12.1). Accordingly, he criticizes Cataline for encouraging young men to behave dissolutely. Lear's retinue aligns with the dissolute young men, and Lear aligns with Cataline. See Sallust, *Cataline's Conspiracy, The Jugurthine War, Histories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

³³ In the sense of 'mildness in a superior toward an inferior in determining punishment' (*On Clemency* 2.3.1).

empirical evidence: ‘He always loved our sister most, and with / what poor judgement he hath now cast her off / appears too grossly’ (1.1.336-338). Still, their embodiment, in Act 3, of Callicles’ self-centered ‘might makes right’ hedonism leaves them ill-equipped to adopt Seneca’s wider communal interest—his respect for all rational beings—and foster social ties with those whom they are able to disempower violently (*Gorgias* 483d-484c): they treat Gloucester inhumanely and ‘seek [Lear’s] death’ (3.4.172). Despite their illogically inordinate responses during Lear’s love test and their later cruelty,³⁴ it would be unfair to characterize them as irrational³⁵ in the same sense that one should not characterize their behavior during the love test and in Act 3 as rational in view of their rationality between these parts of the play. Their fitness to rule is contingent on their motivation to access either aspect of their character, the rational aspect of which justifies their claim to power.

Until their immoderate³⁶ cruelty in Act 3, the play endorses Regan and Goneril’s rationally grounded authority as a challenge to Lear’s requirement that evidence of female weakness supports his sense of being a man. This requirement is sufficiently deleterious, and Lear’s conception of female ability is narrow enough that he perceives his daughters’ self-empowerment – evident in, for example, their ability to enforce their version of justice by reducing Lear’s train – as something that may ‘shake my manhood’ (1.4.313), that threatens his masculinity. Before Act 3, Regan and Goneril remain more rational than Lear because they do not share his unrealistically rigid conception of man and woman and therefore avoid becoming unsettled by its untenability, realizing which causes him to doubt his masculinity.

³⁴ Whereas I describe Regan and Goneril as emphasizing different aspects of their characters in different contexts within the play, I find that critics read their cruelty in Act 3 into their prior behavior. Miola, for example, sees cruelty in Regan’s mere attempt to calm Lear down: ‘I pray you, sir, take patience’ (2.4.154); see Miola, p. 155).

³⁵ Whereas I portray Regan and Goneril’s characters as more multifaceted, Aggeler suggests that they maintain merely a ‘veneer of rationalism’ (324-5), because his identification with Albany’s later diatribe against both sisters (4.2.50-54) prevents him from injecting more flexibility into his negative account of them. Stanley Wells supports my account by indicating that Shakespeare employs prose to emphasize Regan and Goneril’s ‘cold rationality’. However, even their plain remarks reveal an excessive degree of appetite when they defy rational justification, such as their inhumane imperatives to torture Gloucester, to ‘pluck out his eyes’ (3.7.6). See Introduction to William Shakespeare, *King Lear* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 1-80 (p. 50).

³⁶ *King Lear* criticizes immoderation as antithetical to Stoic masculinity. In different senses that convey their conflicting attitudes toward moderation, both Seneca and Callicles want individuals to rule over their appetites. Callicles rates the ability to satisfy them as a masculine virtue. Conversely, Seneca wants people to restrain their appetites in the first place in order to impose order upon their behavior, to preserve their rational faculty, and to pursue goods higher than pleasure.

Regan and Goneril's masculine performance forces Lear to recognize that they do not satisfy his concept of femininity. The tension between Lear's prevailing view of women as subordinate to men and his observation of Regan and Goneril's power induces him to imagine Goneril 'with a white beard' (4.6.115), injecting her with what he conceives to be a sign of masculinity to make sense of her authority given the common early modern conception of the beard as an indication of both manhood and royalty.³⁷ However, Lear also explodes the early modern 'common fantasy' that only men are bearded in order to express his inability to fathom and cope with female authority by deriding it as unnatural.³⁸ From Lear's perspective, his daughters are undeniably masculine, but they are so in ways that he cannot accept emotionally or ideologically.

Regan and Goneril are in control of their ascent. The strength of their reasoning power is evident in their ability to defend their interests through sound decision-making. Both sisters consolidate their power by reducing Lear's retinue after proclaiming it to be practically superfluous and antithetical to the establishment of order within a home. They refuse to acknowledge the symbolic-sentimental importance of a disempowered king clinging to his retinue, this characteristic emblem of royalty with which Lear intends to preserve a measure of his dignity after conceding authority by making his daughters 'my guardians' (2.4.288). Foreshadowing his comments to and about Cordelia in Acts 4 and 5 where he will seek her forgiveness and express pleasure in her feminine voice, Lear urges Regan: 'Thy tender-hefted nature shall not give / Thee o'er to harshness' (2.4.193-194). Lear invokes his conception of a woman's nature in order to influence Regan's actions. Regan, however, no longer needs to play the obsequious, flattering daughter. Instead, she supports her sister in their masculine, rational exercise of power and authority over the feminized, emotional Lear. While substantiating Seneca's notion that women share a man's capacity to behave rationally, she thus resists Lear's gendered view of nature and hierarchy.

I take St. Hilaire's reading of the mock trial scene to overlook the play's acceptance of rationality and justice as lenses for evaluating the characters. In her view, the mock trial scene demonstrates that 'the rationality of [Lear's] case is not sufficient to compel his daughters' obedience'.³⁹ In my view, this showcase of fervor and fantasy compels opposition to Lear's accusations of unfairness against Regan and Goneril by depicting the person making them as mad, as incapable of sustained rational thought. Lear's rationality

³⁷ Fisher, 172.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 166.

³⁹ St. Hilaire, 491.

has eroded to the point that he inhabits an imagined space – a court, which demands rational thought – where he permits preconceived judgments – as in, ‘[Goneril] kicked the poor king her father... She cannot deny it’ (3.6.51-4) – rooted in his experience of emotional injury to supplant reasoned argument and evidence. I contend that Lear’s deteriorated rationality diminishes the validity of St. Hilaire’s thought that *King Lear* suggests that advocating for justice is futile without power insofar as her thought relies on the rationality of Lear’s standpoint so that she can claim that, in the play, reason is insufficient without power to enforce its arguments. In my view, St. Hilaire and Geng err in believing that the play validates the moral or political implications – concerning the value of pity, the merit of his pursuit of power and justice, and the legitimacy of his notion that justice is arbitrary, that it is merely an instrument of political power – of any sympathy with Lear that his powerlessness might arouse in readers. Instead, in alignment with Seneca, the play asks readers to criticize Lear’s irrationality as a source of his unjustness.

The mock trial scene demonstrates the enervating effect of Lear’s passions on his rational faculty. Kent’s question highlights Lear’s inability to be Stoic: ‘O pity! Sir, where is the patience now / That you so oft have boasted to retain?’ (3.6.61-2) whereby ‘patience’ signifies ‘Stoic endurance’ according to which one endures suffering without succumbing to one’s passions.⁴⁰ The pity as shown by Kent and then Edgar (3.6.63) is emasculating because it advances Lear’s sense of his impotence by implying the futility of his push for justice and thus compelling him to ‘lie here and rest awhile’ (3.6.86). This futility illustrates the link between his deteriorated rationality and his devolution from his former royal authority. The former is foreshadowed and the latter is precipitated by his vain refusal to listen to Cordelia’s logic during the love contest. Lear does not lack access to justice because he lacks access to power but rather because he insists that justice should cater to his feelings. Lear’s prioritization of his feelings over Cordelia’s logic renders him unable to defend his conception of justice. *King Lear* does not reduce justice to the means to enforce it, because the play shows that, in the first place, one’s rational capacity determines one’s ability to maintain one’s regal status. Justice is a lens for evaluating the characters in the play because their relationship with justice reflects the way in which their capacities to feel and to reason interact with each other.

Kent’s appeal to Lear in 3.6.61-2 points to a division within Lear. The part of Lear that boasted of being patient – as opposed to succumbing to emotion – urges, ‘Touch me with noble anger, / And let not women’s weapons, water drops, / Stain my man’s cheeks. –

⁴⁰ Kenneth J.E. Graham, “‘Without the Form of Justice’: Plainness and the Performance of Love in *King Lear*”, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42.4 (1991), 438–61 (p. 447).

No... / I will have such revenges on you both' (2.4.317-20). Lear's ignoble anger is the 'empty and swollen' (*On Anger* 1.17.4) anger that Seneca describes as short-lived and that alternates with co-constitutive grief or, like his 'hot tears' (1.4.314), appears simultaneously with it. Lear casts 'water drops', grief, as feminine because he perceives its emasculating effect as it underscores his impotence by reminding him of his loss of paternal and kingly authority. Moreover, Lear denies grief's capacity to nourish let alone sustain his impetus to achieve 'such revenges'. What Lear regards as 'noble anger' is something that Seneca would not call anger.⁴¹ Supported by the 'patience' for which Lear recognizes his need (2.4.312), it allows a man to respond strategically to the source of his injury. Seneca describes, for example, the second Scipio using self-control and avoiding anger and rashness to accomplish revenge through his long siege of Numantia (*On Anger* 1.11.7-8). Lear is divided into the seeker of 'revenges' (2.4.320) who strives to preserve his sense of his masculinity but lacks the Stoic patience necessary to do so and the more resignedly feminized 'poor old man' (2.4.313) who is passive and pities himself. By distancing him perceptibly from the Lear who once could 'so oft have boasted to retain' (3.6.62) Stoic patience, Lear's self-pity challenges the practical possibility that he might mimic the masculine deeds that Seneca praises in the second Scipio, whose Stoic qualities enabled him to contend successfully with his opponents.

Lear's Response to Cordelia's Pity

As Lear grows more desperate for his former royal status, his diminished ability to be patient, just, and reasonable engenders a violent emotional landscape in which the hopefully masculine part of himself with which he identifies wars with the feminized aspects of himself. Lear's emotional landscape constitutes an illness that inhibits his ambitions by forcing him to withdraw further into himself, to inhabit a state of resignation conditioned by his ability to overcome his inner turmoil and reapply his energy outward. This illness requires acts of healing, which Cordelia will try to perform in Act 4. Cordelia, who acknowledges and laments Lear's suffering, pities Lear: 'Was this a face / To be opposed against the jarring winds?' (4.7.37-8). She accords greater importance to her pity than to any justification for revenge. Consequently, she tells Lear that she has 'no cause' (4.7.86) to punish him. She thus places her gentleness in opposition to Lear's emotional turbulence.

⁴¹ As Strier and Miola note, 'noble anger' also recalls other traditions that defend a type of anger that targets honor by redressing a moral wrong; see Strier, p. 49; Miola, p. 158. I discuss the Homeric conception of anger in addition to Seneca's.

King Lear seems to endorse pity by casting it as a source of relief and consolation in a cruel world. Cordelia's pity for Lear and Edgar's 'good pity' (4.6.248) for Gloucester are expressions of affection with which they attempt to recover the respective objects of their pity from fatal situations – Lear expresses his sense of exhaustion and defeat in terms of death: 'You do me wrong to take me out o' th' grave' (4.7.51); Gloucester is more overtly suicidal. Both objects of pity draw strength to live from the companionship that Cordelia and Edgar, respectively, employ pity to cultivate.

However, I believe readers are insufficiently critical of Cordelia's pity. Jason Kerr recognizes that Cordelia 'stands to benefit from [Lear's] healing' (Kerr 56). However, in validating Cordelia's determination to render herself vulnerable to Lear, he, in my view, misunderstands Lear's level of loyalty to her because, in asserting that Cordelia is doing something good for him that elicits gratitude in him, he joins Kent Lehnhof in overlooking her pity.⁴² I object to Aggeler's contention that Cordelia's pity is a requirement for her 'moral growth and activity' (Aggeler 328). Cordelia's pity expresses her lack of self-control – equal, in kind, to the similarly dangerous lack of self-control visible in Lear's anger and grief – and her irrationality in that she wants to help Lear but threatens to debase his self-worth. Cordelia's morally and practically significant failure to be rational remains unstated in accounts that do not appreciate the play's Senecan influence. Given this failure, we should resist accompanying readers like Tassi and Kirsch in feeling moved by Cordelia's pity. Those who defend Cordelia's feelings praise her bare desire to be moral implied by her pity but miss that, because it is influenced by Seneca, the play asks us to evaluate Cordelia by considering more than her mere genuineness in wanting to help Lear. Seneca's wise man does what 'those who feel pity want to do' (*On Clemency* 2.6.2). He can act reasonably and be helpful because, unweakened by the misery he would incur by feeling pity (*On Clemency* 2.6.4), he sees clearly (*On Clemency* 2.6.1). Cordelia's failure to restrain her pity threatens her ability to help Lear.

Despite refreshing him, Cordelia's pity infantilizes Lear into the docile and subservient person who Goneril and Regan said he should be to secure their power over him – Regan, for example, addressed him by asserting, 'You should be ruled and led / By some discretion that discerns your state / Better than you yourself' (2.4.166-168). After having the doctor inform her of Lear's state, Cordelia establishes her protectiveness over Lear by extending him affection from a position of power: 'Let this kiss / Repair those violent harms that my two sisters / Have in thy reverence made' (4.7.32-34). Likewise, she rules

⁴² Jason A. Kerr, 'The Tragedy of Kindness in *King Lear*', *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 61.1 (2021), 45–64 (pp. 56-7). Kent R. Lehnhof, 'Relation and Responsibility: A Levinasian Reading of *King Lear*', *Modern Philology* 111.3 (2014), 485–509.

over and leads him with commands: 'O, look upon me, sir, / And hold your hand in benediction o'er me. / No, sir, you must not kneel' (4.7.65-67). Her caretaking activity cements Lear's dependence on her,⁴³ which implies the same kind of power imbalance implicit in hierarchical distinctions that, given his self-image as a masculine, paternal, and authoritative figure, had rendered Regan and Goneril's commands to reduce his retinue offensive to him.

Pity represents another feminine challenge to Lear's masculine authority. Pity's feminizing effect is evident in the way in which it emasculates both pitiers and objects of pity: 'I am mightily abused; I should e'en die with pity / To see another thus' (4.7.60-1). Giulio Pertile sees these lines as evidence for Lear's 'new empathy', which Lear's experience of pity supposedly engenders.⁴⁴ I disagree with Pertile's reading because Lear remains focused on himself. Lear expresses pity for himself for being 'abused', mistreated by his daughters, by suggesting that he would feel pity if he saw another like him. As Seneca notes, it is characteristic of women to be 'aware of [their] own feebleness' (*On Anger* 1.20.3). Pity emasculates pitiers because they recognize that they 'should e'en die', that they fail to endure the sight arousing their pity. Instead of practicing Stoic patience, they become a passive, 'abused' object. Similarly, pity emasculates its objects by reducing them to the fact of their suffering, to people who merit sorrow. In reducing Lear to this fact, Cordelia's pity reinforces Lear's emasculation by enveloping him with 'grief' (4.3.37), which implies that his authority is lost.

Pity is lethal to Lear because the conditions of his existence cannot allow him to 'see another thus' (4.7.61), to consider someone in his situation. Pity is a product of situations in which kings fall from power, of tragic situations that Lear wants to avoid. Hence, as he did in 1.4.319, he disassociates himself from himself: 'I will not swear these are my hands' (4.7.62). He wants to avoid serving as an object or agent of feminine emotion that emasculates him. Lear does not embrace pity, because he cannot accept his diminished social status, which has elicited Kent and Edgar's pity during the storm and Cordelia's during her return.

While Seneca would support Lear's rejection of pity, this pernicious agent of feminization, per se, Lear's demand that others confirm his self-image as a paternal

⁴³ I wish to focus on Lear. However, in order to establish further the play's criticism of pity, it is worth noting that much of my discussion also applies to Gloucester. For example, as Cordelia does to Lear, Edgar cements Gloucester's dependence on him by leading Gloucester with commands: 'Give me your hand; / I'll lead you to some biding' (4.6.248-9).

⁴⁴ Giulio J. Pertile, 'King Lear and the Uses of Mortification', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 67.3 (2016), 319-43 (p. 343).

authority figure contradicts Seneca's insistence on self-sufficiency. Lear's grief, his resentful rejection of his degraded condition, and his resistance to Cordelia's pity, which constitutes her response to his new condition, impede him from satisfying Seneca's assertion that we may 'find enjoyment and relaxation and pleasure in any kind of life' (*On Tranquility of Mind* 10.1). Lear's inability to attain this Stoic ideal of mental tranquility is ironically – because Cordelia's pity disturbs him – evident in his refusal of Cordelia's pity, which is a consequence of his determination to maintain his sense of his manhood and authority without, as the play's survivors do, subscribing to Seneca's idea that one should accept one's condition. This determination prevents Lear from being satisfied with solitude or with his current condition.

Cordelia's pity further frustrates Lear's ability to attain the Stoic ideal of self-sufficiency by implying – and, indeed, convincing him – that he requires aid and companionship because of his enfeebled condition. Perceiving his enfeeblement, Lear suffers the defiant need to assert himself against somebody – he also continues to strive to subordinate others to him. In this sense, he is a prisoner of his sense of himself as an authoritative figure. He depends on other people to prompt him to feel that he possesses authority. An earlier example is the love contest, where he relied on his daughters to foster in him the feeling that they depend on him to dictate their futures. His self-image thus paradoxically renders him reliant on other people, although it is now Cordelia's pity and his perception of his enfeeblement – it is never his dependence per se – that cruelly challenge his self-image in that they induce him to perceive this dependence as feminizing. The play endorses Stoic self-sufficiency by illustrating the fragility both of Lear's masculinity and of his sense of himself.

While Lear, beset by feelings of guilt stemming from his treatment of Cordelia, gratified as a father by her affection, and conditionally resigned as a former ruler, may seem inclined to receive Cordelia's pity insofar as he embraces their reunion's tender emotional tenor, such as when he kneels or tries to kneel (4.7.67), he never relinquishes his desire for power. *King Lear* criticizes pity by validating Lear's endeavor to protect himself from the threat it poses to his masculinity – Lear uses his pursuit of authority and other forms of power to repel his grief and his sense of his enfeeblement, which Cordelia's pity and his self-pity had stimulated. Lear's continued pursuit of power reflects his understanding that pity is antithetical to his sense of being a man, which is essential to his self-worth and his sense of his place in society.

In agreement with William Kennedy's assertion that Lear is willing to submit himself to Cordelia's punishment but 'accepts the forgiveness of his daughter' and repents, St. Hilaire purports to find evidence that Lear embraces Cordelia's pity in the extent to which

it teaches him to think differently. For example, in St. Hilaire's view, Cordelia's pity eradicates Lear's belief that 'bad behavior' warrants punishment.⁴⁵ Supposedly, 'When Lear asks for – and then imagines asking for – Cordelia's forgiveness, he does so because he has already been affected by her pitiful mode of relation to him'.⁴⁶ According to St. Hilaire, Lear asks Cordelia for forgiveness because he rejects retributive justice.

I contend that Lear's response to Cordelia's pity demonstrates its lack of effect on his character. In my view, Lear is affected by his disillusionment with his other daughters, which intensifies his fear of retribution from Cordelia: 'I know you do not love me, for your sisters / Have, as I do remember, done me wrong' (4.7.83-4). Lear asks and imagines asking Cordelia for forgiveness in order to avoid reexperiencing the exertion of power with which his other daughters had offended his notion of paternal authority, which his refusal to request their forgiveness in 2.4.171 failed to defend. When Cordelia assures him that she has 'no cause' (4.7.86), no basis for retribution, he changes the subject in a way that emphasizes his senility:⁴⁷ 'Am I in France?' (4.7.88). This instance of senility seems disingenuous because it is self-serving and well-timed and because he had just conveyed memories incisively while articulating distinctions with logical clarity. By seeming to substantiate his appearance of vulnerability that impassions Cordelia's care for him, Lear's contrivance of innocent senility helps him follow a pattern whereby he 'attempts to see good in any one of his daughters who will protect him from the others'.⁴⁸ He makes this pattern more explicit when he refuses to see Regan and Goneril (5.3.8-9) before he imagines asking Cordelia for forgiveness and coexisting serenely with her. Rather than embrace Cordelia's pity, Lear takes advantage of it – in the same sense that he sought to benefit from Regan's 'tender-hefted nature' (2.4.193) – in order to evade punishment and pursue his self-preservation. Lear's opportunistic impulses, which help inform his pursuit of power, supersede any guilt he feels for his treatment of Cordelia.

Lear's unwillingness to consider reforming his character and the persistence of his vices, especially his selfishness, indicate that he remains unrepentant. While his genuine affection seems to suggest that he has softened and therefore improved his character, accounts that cast Lear as reformed overlook that Lear lacks the political means and the courage – because he feels that he requires her protection – to command and otherwise overpower Cordelia as overtly as he did in Act 1. Such accounts conflate moral

⁴⁵ William J. Kennedy, 'Shakespeare's *King Lear* and the Bible', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible and Literature*, ed. by Calum Carmichael (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 181-99 (p. 196). St. Hilaire, 495.

⁴⁶ St. Hilaire, 499.

⁴⁷ To be clear, Lear may be senile *and* exaggerate his senility.

⁴⁸ Phoebe Spinrad, 'Dramatic "Pity" and the Death of Lear', *Renascence* 43.4 (1991), 231-40 (p. 233).

improvement with beautiful sentiments and powerlessness. Lear still recognizes that Cordelia is 'my child' (4.7.79), and, selfishly, still expects kindness from those whom he calls 'children' (3.2.18-19).⁴⁹ In conveying this expectation to Cordelia by insisting that she 'must bear with me' (4.7.97), Lear rearticulates his irrational version of justice – that he failed to assert in Act 1 – that positions him above reproof.⁵⁰ Instead of motivating Lear to behave selflessly, Cordelia's pity inspires her to renounce a basis, a 'cause' (4.7.86), for retribution, which emboldens Lear's endeavor to preserve his authority.

I find that the way in which Lear sympathizes with the 'poor naked wretches' (3.4.32) casts doubt upon Bui and St. Hilaire's accounts of Lear's change in values. According to St. Hilaire, Lear's openness to pity removes the value that power and justice had for him (St. Hilaire 496). In agreement with St. Hilaire, Bui thinks that, having grown older, weaker, and sicklier, Lear accepts both his old age and mortality, or 'life's finitude' (Bui 151). In my view, Bui and St. Hilaire share Kennedy, Adamson, and Norton's inadequate appreciation of Lear's endeavor to assert himself. I contend that, for Lear, any kind of concern for another's welfare – including sympathy or pity – necessitates commitment to power and justice, which indicates both his desire to recover his status of his younger days and his resistance to accepting his old age and mortality. This commitment is evident in his appeal to the gods, the 'pomp' (3.4.38) in 'the heavens' (3.4.41), to 'Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel, / That thou may'st shake the superflux to them / And show the heavens more just' (3.4.39-41). Lear's sympathy for the poor strengthens his sense of justice because his attentiveness to 'what wretches feel' enables him to perceive an inequity whereby some possess a 'superflux', or things that they do not need, while others are comparable to beasts (2.4.307) because, similar to him and in contrast to Regan and Goneril, they do not possess 'more than nature needs' (2.4.305). Lear's appeal to the gods' sense of justice reiterates his devotion to power and justice by rearticulating, in the form of broader criticism of inequity in society, his futile objections (e.g., 2.4.305) to his daughters dispossessing him.

Lear translates his frustration with the futility of his objections to his daughters into a moral indignation that, by underpinning his challenge to the gods, produces in him a sense of self-importance that compensates for his feelings of impotence. He resists Regan and Goneril's power by pleading for the gods' intercession and by allying himself morally

⁴⁹ Hence, I take issue with Sylvia Adamson's thought that Lear's self-identification as Cordelia's father does not constitute an expression of his authority over her; see 'Questions of Identity in Renaissance Drama: New Historicism Meets Old Philology', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 61.1 (2010), 56-77 (p. 67).

⁵⁰ I disagree with Norton's contention that Lear 'does not fight to keep his dignity' (p. 152), because, in reinvoking his paternal and royal privileges, Lear does not behave as if the storm had simply 'reduced [him] to a humble state' (p. 152).

with the poor. He forges a community with the latter⁵¹ that is predicated on a shared experience of dispossession and that elevates him morally above Regan and Goneril. By elevating himself in this way, Lear redefines hierarchy in moral terms in order to renew his sense of power over Regan and Goneril. Lear's redefinition of hierarchy exemplifies his arbitrariness – whereas Regan and Goneril, before Act 3, deserved to gain power because they reasoned toward their decisions – in reconceptualizing what is just or unjust in order to satisfy his desire for power in its current, momentary shape – his desire for power in Act 1, when he could use his possessions to leverage his power, had motivated him to be the dispossessor, to dispossess the disobedient Cordelia for challenging his authority – and his resentment toward Regan and Goneril.

Lear's self-assertion emanating from his sympathy for Cordelia – he cries, 'My poor fool is hanged' (5.3.369) – suggests further that any concern of his for another's welfare is predicated on the value that he places on power and justice. Lear complains, 'Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, / And thou no breath at all?' (5.3.370-371). Lear's connection with his daughter magnifies hierarchy's importance to him in that he appeals to notions of humans' moral superiority – Aristotle, for example, reserved moral virtue for humans – and to justice in order to criticize Albany's declaration that 'All foes [shall taste] / The cup of their deservings' (5.3.367-368). Albany, one of the play's survivors, identifies merit in cosmic justice – that is, in alignment with Seneca, he justifies the workings of fate uncritically – by finding that people encounter the end they deserve. Lear, because his affection for Cordelia induces him to perceive her humanness and establish her superiority to animals who are allowed to live, challenges this merit by underpinning his unrelenting search for signs of life in her – his insistence that her lips contain such a sign (5.3.374-375) confirms that he believes that she remains alive – with his denial that she could have deserved to die. With this denial, because he uses it to override Albany's understanding of reality and justice by asserting the authority of his own and, irrationally, to continue positioning those close to him as above reproof, Lear expresses his interest in power and justice.

Lear's indignation at reality conveys his persistent opposition to believing or allowing that reality develops without regard for his feelings – he likewise swore that Regan and

⁵¹ Albeit a community to which, as Lehnhof observes, he does not actually offer help; see Lehnhof, 496. In my view, Lehnhof's observation undermines Kerr's positive account of Lear's relationship with the poor. I find that Lear's refusal to understand Poor Tom—Lear insists on blaming 'unkind daughters' (3.4.77) for Poor Tom's misery even after he learns that Poor Tom does not have daughters—indicates that his bitterness toward Regan and Goneril eclipses his concern with developing 'solidarity' with the poor; see Kerr, 54. Pertile perceives a similar indication, although he focuses on the physical aspect of Lear's experience while I focus on Lear's psychology (338).

Cornwall did not punish Kent (2.4.23) and denied the justness of Kent's punishment, because Kent's punishment elicited his prideful indignation. By reiterating his irrational demand that justice cater to his feelings, Lear defends himself against cosmic justice. This instance of self-empowerment – via his self-centered challenge to the gods – reinforces Lear's concern with his level of power and with his hierarchical position that his criticism of inequity already demonstrates. Whereas Albany considers cosmic justice to apply to 'all', 'all friends' (5.3.366) and 'all foes' (5.3.367), such that everybody conforms to an order dictated by higher powers, Lear's feelings move him to defy this higher unity by asserting his power to privilege Cordelia.

In prison, Lear imaginatively expands the sphere of power relations in order to participate in it. He transfers his desire for power from the public sphere to the secluded world inside the prison where he may more easily reimagine a sense of his former power.⁵² Continually embittered by his public demise, he endeavors to feel superior by procuring immunity to shifting fortunes, to 'wear out, / ... packs and sects of great ones / That ebb and flow by th' moon' (5.3.18-20). Lear targets a lasting kind of strength that would have protected him from losing greatness, his higher status. Thus, this endeavor to endure links his interest in self-preservation, which his awareness of his lost power sustains as an instinctive consolation, with his continued pursuit of power. Cordelia's pity for Lear has not altered his motivation, which in combination with his irrational disposition is sufficiently strong to compel him to reimagine or otherwise ignore reality, to secure a higher position of power.

Lear's attitude toward the prospect of executing justice is conditioned by his perception of his access to the requisite power. Necessarily recognizing that he lacks this access, Lear translates his desire to administer justice himself upon his enemies into a wish for someone⁵³ with the power he desires for himself to achieve justice for him – as if he retained the power to dictate another person's future – through violence: 'The good years shall devour them, flesh and fell, / Ere they shall make us weep. We'll see 'em starved first' (5.3.27-9). This grandiose and enraged expression of fantasy, besides reconveying that Lear's feelings intensify his alienation from reality, also reflects Lear's continued

⁵² Lear's spoken eagerness to withdraw to prison with Cordelia seems to vindicate Goneril's imputation of 'Epicurism' (1.4.251). However, he perverts Epicurus' ideal of 'withdrawal from the mass of people', of confining one's attention to one's own private circle of friends, by using his isolation to feel power in a way that satisfies his persistent desire to maintain a sense of relation to society. Epicurus' ideal thus offers relief to weary individuals but also threatens to mask one's true desires by permitting refuge in fantasy; see *Leading Doctrines*, p. 14.

⁵³ Lear's reference to time on a large scale – 'years' – suggests that he has some sort of cosmic entity in mind, someone powerful enough to make his opponents 'starved'.

strategy, when frustrated by his impotence, to resort to threatening and cursing those whom he identifies as perpetrators of his powerlessness. Because he desires justice, he employs threats and curses as an empty replacement for the power to punish that he lacks. By fantasizing, Lear reimagines the power to punish as a power to declare other people's punishment. Lear's threats and curses show that he would rather be 'Lear's shadow' (1.4.237) than renounce the value that he places in power and justice. He would rather enact a weaker version of himself than undergo the transformation in character that recent critics impute to him.

Cordelia does not simply pose a threat to Lear. Opposed to the pernicious potential of her pity, she reminds Lear of his highest place in society to help him occupy it. As she does when he divides his kingdom (e.g., 1.1.101), she 'addresses him only as king' (Foakes 35) and acknowledges 'thy reverence' (4.7.34). She flatteringly encourages him to seek a 'restoration' (4.7.31) of his ability to command reverence by undoing Regan and Goneril's 'violent harms' (4.7.33). They made him vulnerable. Cordelia insists that Lear 'must not kneel' (4.7.67), because such a display of vulnerability – Lear suggests a power imbalance in Cordelia's favor by kneeling or trying to kneel – is inappropriate in someone who should command reverence. Cordelia's endeavor to revive Lear's belief in his authority ensures that Lear still wants to say, 'I am a king' (4.6.219). Lear still does not wish to engage with the 'cares and business' (1.1.41) belonging to a king. However, his withering self-confidence notwithstanding, he wishes to feel like a king: 'I will die bravely ... / I will be jovial' (4.6.218-19). In the same sense as when he surrounded himself with knights and hunted,⁵⁴ he wants to possess what he considers the masculine traits of a king, to exercise the virtues of a warrior and maintain a positive attitude – unlike the anger and grief that he had displayed – despite adversity.

By granting him affection with her kiss, Cordelia allows Lear to restore his paternal sense of self and thus to rehabilitate his sense of his masculinity. Regan and Goneril's irreverence toward him had denied him any sense of paternal or personal power or authority. Consequently, he asked Goneril, for example, 'Are you our daughter?' (1.4.224). Because he had also already disowned Cordelia, he could no longer feel like a father. Cordelia's affection recalls his love contest when he had the power to divide his kingdom among his daughters. When Lear praises Cordelia's 'soft, / Gentle, and low' voice (5.3.328-9), he not only feminizes her in order to reassert his paternal authority over her while she is no longer alive to challenge him, he also and relatedly flatters himself by imagining her contrary to the 'untender' (1.1.118) daughter who had withheld her voice by refusing to flatter him. By reimagining a subordinate Cordelia whom he would have

⁵⁴ Foakes, p. 40.

already favored in the love contest, he contrives a renewed sense of paternity that imaginatively undoes Regan and Goneril's 'violent harms' (4.7.33) proceeding from his decision to favor over his favorite daughter two lethal opponents to his power and authority.

Despite their apparent tension in view of her pity for him, Lear's motivations to develop a private bond with Cordelia and accrue kingly power signify continuity and coherence in his thinking. Already, he conflates his royal authority and parental authority, attempting to use the latter to buttress the former in a symbolic way that visually reinforces his personal power, when he bemoans his 'daughters' hearts' (2.4.315) after Regan and Goneril reduce his retinue. He relies on his paternal identity to compensate for his concession of his kingdom by justifying his maintenance of regal symbols, of people whom he may command (2.4.276) as if he were still king. Because it challenges his personal and paternal authority, which he considers incontrovertible and which he hoped to secure by benefitting his daughters with parts of his kingdom, Lear regards the lack of filial affection, apparent in his daughters' ingratitude, as unnatural: 'as this mouth should tear this hand / For lifting food to 'it?' (3.4.18-19).⁵⁵ Because Lear views filial affection – which he reduces to deferential displays of kindness (1.4.71) – as a natural counterpart to paternal affection, to 'lifting food to 'it', or supporting his daughters in a way that illustrates their dependence on him, his daughters' treatment of him compels him to worry that he will lose his paternal affection: 'I will forget my nature. So kind a father!' (1.5.32). Cordelia's affection – insofar as it respects Lear's kingly self-image – and his pursuit of power and authority satisfy his relational conception of nature whereby he feels like himself when he relates to others from a position of supremacy, which he anchors in his 'manhood' (1.4.313).

Lear relishes the opportunity to retranslate into reality his idea of the right father-daughter relationship because this idea supports his sense of masculinity. I take issue with Michael Holahan's contention that 'Lear... comes to a profound revision of the value of his daughter and her gender', because Lear never loses his gendered conception of hierarchy.⁵⁶ His devotion to this conception is evident in the aspects of Cordelia that motivate his partiality for her: 'Her voice was ever soft, / Gentle, and low, an excellent thing in woman' (5.3.328-9). For Lear, the value of affection still consists in its usefulness

⁵⁵ Ironically, Lear complains about his daughters' ingratitude in terms that describe his own behavior because he refuses to 'receive attendance' (2.4.278) from Regan or Goneril's servants. In order to preserve his feeling of masculinity, Lear overlooks indications of dependence on or bases for gratitude for any of his three daughters.

⁵⁶ Michael Holahan, "'Look, Her Lips': Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48.4 (1997), 406–31 (p. 412).

to his paternal authority: in Act 1, he positioned affection as a necessary element of father-daughter relationships that required his daughters to flatter him; in Act 5, he still reduces affection to a reinforcement of his hierarchical supremacy over the person exhibiting affection toward him. Lear satisfies his unrelenting endeavor to feel like a man by encountering or imagining female subservience.

Lear rejects pity because he desires his previous level of power and authority. Hence, killing Cordelia's executioner encourages Lear to reminisce about his manly exhibitions: 'I have seen the day, with my good biting falchion / I would have made him skip' (5.3.333-4). In my view, Roy Battenhouse's Christianized account of Lear experiencing 'his final resignation to a death of human wishes' overlooks Lear's pride, which expresses an emotional attachment – to his manlier past – that precludes resignation.⁵⁷ Lear's opportunistic act of violent self-assertion evinces his unwillingness to accept either his subservient position or the pity linked inextricably with his decline. Because Cordelia had enforced his dependence on her by employing pity to impose her maternal function upon him, a renascent feeling of power animates him after her death frees him from her influence. He transforms from a feeble and senile man into a proud and brave Homeric warrior, asserting his conception of justice by exacting retribution against her hangman and highlighting his social significance by identifying the hangman as a 'slave' (5.3.330). This rebirth of his authority illustrates the end that he has unrelentingly pursued with which Cordelia's emasculating pity was incompatible.

While, after Cordelia returns to him, Lear's pursuit of power and justice may seem morally supportable because it motivates his rejection of pity, enacts his love for her, and facilitates his defense of her, Lear continues to privilege his own feelings by expecting justice to cater to them. He has merely become more likable. Lear's loss of his retinue, which symbolizes his exclusion from the public sphere in which his irrationality renders his authority inimical to the construction of order, partially remolds him. In some respects distant from the ruthless version of himself who disowns Cordelia and banishes Kent in Act 1, Lear develops depths of humility and feeling that make him more sympathetic, although continuities in his character centering on his anger must restrict his sympathetic potential. Lear's development into a more deeply multidimensional figure – into a figure who still vainly values his power and authority and remains prone to violent impulses but whose increased tenderness stabilizes his affection for Cordelia – entices the reader to sympathize with his hope, together with Cordelia, to 'see' their enemies 'starved' (5.3.28). Pursuing power and justice requires him to reject pity, which would deprive him

⁵⁷ Roy Battenhouse, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Its Art and Its Christian Premises* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), p. 291.

of the manly bravado and the masculine strength and self-confidence that he recognizes he needs to recultivate even an imagined semblance of his previous ambitions. However, the play's Senecan impulse establishes that his irrationality, which conflates the construction of order with the satisfaction of his feelings, continues to render his pursuit of power and justice indefensible.

Conclusion

Shakespeare's play corroborates Seneca's criticism of pity. Seneca criticizes its incompatibility with justice, which is a consequence of the pitier's inability to remain reasonable when confronted with the sufferer's condition:

Avoid pity; for it's the fault of a paltry spirit that collapses at the impression of other people's woes. Accordingly, it's most familiar to all the worst people: old or foolish women, whom even the most noxious types move with their tears. ... Pity looks only at the state a person is in, not its cause. (*On Clemency* 2.5.1)

As do 16th-century Neo-Stoics like Charron and other intellectuals in the same time period like Sir Thomas Elyot, Seneca deems pitiers mentally weak in that seeing the sufferer overwhelms their rational capacity.⁵⁸ When Cordelia tells Lear that she has 'no cause' to punish him, she is not honestly assessing her father as Regan and Goneril do in Act 1. Instead, she omits consideration of his sins against her, which were sufficiently serious to debilitate her social prospects, destroy her financial situation, and otherwise deleteriously upend the course of her life. According to Seneca, 'Forgiveness is granted to one who ought to be punished; a wise man, however, neither does anything he ought not to do nor forgoes doing anything he ought to do. Accordingly, he does not remit a punishment that he ought to exact' (*On Clemency* 2.7.1). Seneca would not have wanted Cordelia to forgive Lear and would blame her surrender to pity for her unreasonable decision to do so. Readers who believe that *King Lear* challenges Stoicism replicate Cordelia's fault by deemphasizing Lear's sins.

I find Kerr mistaken in claiming that the play endorses Cordelia's care for Lear because it fosters a form of kinship that narrows the gap in power between them.⁵⁹ In claiming this, because Cordelia's pity helps motivate her care for Lear, Kerr complements St.

⁵⁸ Aggeler, 323; Cynthia Herrup, 'The King's Two Genders', *Journal of British Studies* 45.3 (2006), 493-510 (p. 506).

⁵⁹ Kerr, 56.

Hilaire and Geng's belief, to which I likewise object, that the play asks us to value pity as a source of community.⁶⁰ Because Regan and Goneril consolidate a community amongst themselves by mutually asserting themselves against Lear, I fail to see how pity's ability to create community makes it morally superior to the pursuit of power. In my view, pity generates an uneven community – unlike the one between two equals, Regan and Goneril – because the pitier imposes his or her will upon the pitied object. Pity is also morally problematic because, as Cordelia does to Lear, it overlooks the pitied person's responsibility, which, by infantilizing the pitied object, suggests his or her inability to contribute to the community's well-being.

Stoic logic guides the play's restoration of order. In alignment with Edgar's observation that '[t]he gods are just, and of our pleasant vices / Make instruments to plague us' (5.3.204-5), the play punishes with violence those who, in opposition to Seneca's teaching, are violently impelled by passion and thus are unfit to rule themselves or others. Gloucester cannot survive his experience of 'extremes of passion, joy and grief' (5.3.234) facilitated by his misjudgment of Edmund and Edgar. Cruelty propels Cornwall when he tortures Gloucester until Gloucester's servant stabs him. Jealousy drives Regan and Goneril to their mutual demise and spurs Edmund to provoke a duel with Edgar who kills him. Cordelia yields to pity, which renders her a 'paltry spirit' (*On Clemency* 2.5.1) vulnerable to merciless Edmund. Kent's pity – when his 'strings of life / Began to crack' (5.3.254-5) in response to his 'piteous tale' (5.3.252) about Lear – motivates his suicide. Finally, Lear succumbs to grief when he beholds Cordelia's corpse.⁶¹ These characters die because their passions incite violent reactions.⁶² They need to die because they are unfit to secure a peaceful order and community.

King Lear leaves those to rule whose reason remains intact. Whereas Cornwall lacks 'control' (3.7.30) over his 'wrath' (3.7.29), Albany maintains composure. Albany assesses situations by learning the relevant facts.⁶³ As when he hopes for 'the heavens' (4.2.57) to punish Regan and Goneril for endorsing the imitation of 'monsters' (4.2.61) by violating nature's precept of not condemning one's 'origin' (4.2.41), Albany anchors his defense of order and his moral criticism in the cosmic justice practiced by the gods in

⁶⁰ See St. Hilaire, 504, and Geng, p. 120.

⁶¹ Lear's death underscores his feminization because he mimics 'women whose grief ... was ended only by their death' (*Consolation to Helvia* 16.2).

⁶² Seneca observes this causal relationship between passion and violence, noting that, for example, a king exposes himself to more violence when he rouses hostility by behaving cruelly than when he remains rational by practicing clemency (*On Clemency* 1.8.7).

⁶³ Peter Mortenson, 'The Role of Albany', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 16.2 (1965), 217-25 (p. 220).

whom, as Sandra Hole notes, he has developed faith throughout the play.⁶⁴ His ability to remain patient indicates his emotional stability, which enables him to resist pity: ‘This judgment of the heavens, that makes us / tremble, / Touches us not with pity’ (5.3.274-276). Albany prioritizes justice, over self-indulgent feelings like pity, as a value that sustains ‘us’, a community.⁶⁵ Edgar, who also survives, replicates Albany’s Stoicism: ‘The weight of this sad time we must obey’ (5.3.392). Following Seneca’s insistence that ‘good men... must not level complaints against fate’ (*On Providence* 2.4), Edgar expresses agreement with Albany’s uncritical acceptance of fate.⁶⁶ Plain acceptance of reality typifies the way in which the play wants us to respond to the incessant ‘reversals of hope’ emphasized in pessimistic readings of Shakespeare’s play.⁶⁷ As evident in Edgar and Albany’s calm deliberations, which are typical of Seneca’s wise man, tempering one’s emotions by accepting events as necessary allows one’s reason to remain intact.

By imagining a harmony between the will of ‘the heavens’ (5.3.274) and that of primarily rational agents, Albany’s piety helps reinforce the play’s endorsement of power and justice as practically valuable objects of pursuit that sustain community. Their moral value hinges on their application to morally good ends and, therefore, on an agent’s ability to maintain emotional stability in situations weighed by human passions and conflicting human interests. While Albany has biases and hopes – such as the hope for Cordelia that ‘the gods defend her!’ (5.3.307) – that are dashed, his pious resignation enables him to continue exercising virtue and expecting ‘wages’, or benefits, from it (5.3.367) even when

⁶⁴ Sandra Hole, ‘The Background of Divine Action in *King Lear*’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 8.2, (1968), 217–33 (p. 221).

⁶⁵ My emphasis on the play’s illustration of masculinity’s importance to Stoicism allows me to respond to Lehnhof, Aggeler, and Pertile regarding the moral value of emotions and Stoicism in *King Lear*. Because Albany’s preservation of his masculinity allows him to behave morally by resisting feminine emotion, I find more merit in Lehnhof’s emphasis on self-preservation as a requirement for moral activity in the play than in Aggeler’s emphasis on feeling as such a requirement; see Lehnhof, 495 and Aggeler, 328.. For the same reason, I take issue with Pertile’s refusal to see in ‘stoic endurance’ a ‘more positive idea of moral action or feeling’ (335). ‘Stoic endurance’ does more than numb one to pain. The moral behavior that ‘stoic endurance’ makes possible enables individuals to advance their well-being and to contribute to the growth of community.

⁶⁶ While Edmund expresses agreement with Edgar, he remains self-centered: ‘Th’ hast spoken right. ’Tis true. / The wheel is come full circle; I am here’ (5.3.208-209). He responds superficially to Edgar’s assertion of the gods’ justness before dramatizing his own position in a way that provokes doubt over the depth of his sense of guilt. Hence, Albany ignores Edmund and praises Edgar’s ‘royal nobleness’ (5.3.211). Edmund’s repeated attempts to foreground himself as he dies undercut the sincerity of his supposed moral transformation. Conversely, Edgar and Albany selflessly focus on their community and the gods, demonstrating their Stoic piety.

⁶⁷ Richard D. Fly, ‘Beyond Extremity: A Reading of *King Lear*’, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 16.1 (1974), 45–63 (p. 51).

all striving seems futile, whereas more feminine figures like Kent and Lear suffer for lacking the discipline to curb their passions and to respond rationally to circumstances that they miss the power to control.