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‘I HEARD MYSELF PROCLAM’D:’ THE TRANSITION IN THE CRITICAL AND TEXTUAL RECEPTION OF EDGAR IN *KING LEAR*

Abstract: The publication of Shakespeare's First Folio in 1623 marked the beginning of a period, lasting over three centuries, in which the critical reception of Edgar in *King Lear* was often unenthusiastic, judging by the opinions of subsequent theatre practitioners and literary critics. There were voices that questioned Edgar's relevance to the plot and considered him a superfluous character. Moreover, Edgar's heteroglossia was increasingly toned down in stage interpretations, removing the complex polyphony of Shakespeare's character by omitting lines given to the character in the Quarto version of the play. Since the mid-twentieth century, however, the critical (and textual) reception of Edgar has changed, as evidenced by the research of textual scholars who seek to preserve the ethical meaning of Edgar in the play. This has resulted in Edgar's text being revisited in stage performances. In addition, recent critics are paying more attention to Edgar's dexterity in the use of language and disguise, which they believe restores the character's role as crucial to the play's plot.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Edgar, *King Lear*, textual scholars, critical reception.

Streszczenie: Publikacja Pierwszego Folio Szekspira w 1623 roku zapoczątkowała trwający ponad trzy stulecia okres, w którym krytyczna ocena Edgara w *Królu Learze* była często niezbyt entuzjastyczna, sądząc po opiniach późniejszych praktyków teatralnych i krytyków literackich. Zdarzały się głosy, które kwestionowały znaczenie Edgara dla fabuły i uważały go za postać zbędną. Ponadto, heteroglosja Edgara stawała się coraz bardziej stonowana w interpretacjach scenicznych, usuwając złożoną polifonię postaci Szekspira oraz pomijając wersety nadane postaci w wersji Quarto sztuki. Jednak od połowy XX wieku krytyczny (i tekstowy) odbiór Edgara zmienił się, o czym świadczą badania badaczy tekstu, którzy zaczęli dążyć do zachowania etycznego znaczenia roli Edgara w sztuce. Spowodowało to powrót do oryginalnego tekstu Edgara w przedstawieniach teatralnych. Natomiast, Jego niedawni krytycy zaczęli zwracać większą uwagę

na zręczność z jaką Edgar używa języka oraz Jego umiejętność stosowania kamuflażu. Aspekty te, zdaniem krytyków, nadają bohaterowi kluczową rolę w fabule sztuki.

Słowa kluczowe: Szekspir, Edgar, *Król Lear*, badacze tekstu, recepcja krytyczna.

Introduction

Edgar's banishment and adoption of disguise in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, is witnessed in the transformation of a figure of the nobility into the outcast garb of the bedlam beggar Poor Tom. Such a metamorphosis is also evident within the critical reception of Edgar himself, spanning over three centuries. The publication of Shakespeare's First Folio in 1623, began a lengthy period of turbulent reception of Edgar. Disparities in the character's lines are evident when the Folio is compared to the play's 1608 Quarto version, seeing a reduction in the Edgar's role of forty-one lines. Five scenes from the Quarto attributed to Edgar are missing from the Folio. Within these Folio cuts, the complete disregard of the "mock" trial scene results in a fourteen-line omission of Edgar's blank verse soliloquy (*King Lear*, 3.6.102-115)¹ and the narrative of his reunion with Kent (5.3.205-222). Such a treatment of Edgar, diminishing his impact in the play, was also felt in the critical reaction to the character. The proceeding centuries saw Edgar largely subject to the mercy of stage interpreters who made considerable cuts to Edgar's lines in a bid to suit perceived audience tastes. Critical reaction in the form of literary scholars remained largely unfavourable as they contended that Edgar was unworthy of being significant to the plot or even insignificant to the analysis of the play. However, it was in the second half of the twentieth century that textual scholars, critics, and stage interpreters began a substantial restorative revolution.

Subsequently, it is my intention to explore how Edgar has been restored to critical acceptance by firstly outlining the reactions of those practitioners and scholars who historically attempted to discredit Edgar's role. This is followed by an outline of what I perceive to be this transition in the reception of the character, the catalyst of which being the latter twentieth century debates of the play's textual scholars. In their analyses, Edgar is prioritized, the attribution of the final lines of the play is examined, and ethical authority is ascribed to him. Following this, I then wish to outline further critical viewpoints making the case for his ethical importance. Through an additional means to readdress this, the original title of the play will then be examined. Finally, I will outline the views of most recent critics who have continued to uphold the vitality of Edgar, particularly evident in his use of language and disguise strategies.

¹ The following edition of the play is used: *King Lear: Arden Shakespeare Third Edition*. ed. Reginald A. Foakes, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005).

The curtailment of Edgar on the stage

The role of Edgar and the heteroglossia featured in Shakespeare's original Quarto and Folio versions (hereinafter referred to as Q and F) has also been progressively diminished in stage productions and revisions of *King Lear*. Nahum Tate's 1681 version² was to form the basis of a majority of theatrical productions until the nineteenth century. This revision of Edgar attempted to romanticize the role by initiating a love affair with Cordelia. Subsequently, poor Tom's disguise is rewritten to draw more attention to Edgar's service to Cordelia. By replacing France as Cordelia's suitor with Edgar, Tate further simplifies the play's plot and motivation. Furthermore, Edgar as hero and Edmund as the villain now compete not only for a father's love but also for Cordelia's love, as well as for control of the kingdom. Edgar is also given more religious emphasis which is evidenced in a greater affection of filial worship toward not only his father, but to Lear too. Tate tries to ensure that as a figure of piety, Edgar continuously demonstrates his religious strength and Christian values throughout the play. In Act V of Tate's version, Edgar believes that Lear's kingdom will be restored as "The gods have weighed our sufferings; / W're past the fire, and now must shine to ages" (V. vi. 40-41).

All these changes merely result in serving to generalize Edgar's dilemma, stripping away the complex multiplicity of voices in Shakespeare's character. Jean-François Ducis's re-working of the play, *Le Roi Lear* (1783), helps to enforce this view. The plot is adapted to cater for contemporary French tastes and sensibilities³ and sees Edgar, still consigned to banishment, not only deprived of his Poor Tom camouflage but the many lines conveying the character's rich and imaginative appropriation of language. Furthermore, he no longer appears within the tripartite enactment of insanity between Lear and the Fool in Act 3 in which Shakespeare had intended to display Edgar's verbal dexterity at the behest of innermost personal crises.

Friedrich Schröder's 1778 adaptation is far more like Shakespeare's than either Tate's or Ducis's versions, while the German actor and theatre director also tries to bring the play into line with neoclassical principles. Simon Williams notes that this version helped to restore the audience's appreciation of Edgar, typified by a portrayal of "extreme indigence" and showing how the part of Poor Tom could elevate Edgar "above the part of common life."⁴ However, while Williams acknowledges that Edgar's lines are again truncated in accordance to public tastes,

² Nahum Tate, *The History of King Lear. Acted at the Duke's Theatre. Reviv'd with Alterations*, (London: Printed for E. Flesher, and are to be sold by R. Bentley, and M. Magnes in Russel Street near Covent Garden, 1681).

³ A full analysis of this adaptation is to be found in John Golder, *Shakespeare for the Age of Reason; the earliest stage adaptations of Jean-François Ducis, 1769-1792*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 112-153.

⁴ Simon Williams, *Shakespeare on the German Stage, Volume 1: 1586-1914*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 84.

this only deprives the audience of opportunities to appreciate the character's command of language as he articulates his suffering.

Tate's adaptation of the play continued to have influence on those theatre managers and impresarios who staged *King Lear* during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries despite attempts to resist it. David Garrick's 1756 production cut two hundred lines from Tate but only restored ten lines from Shakespeare's text. George Colman, in 1768, removed the love scenes and Cordelia's marriage to Edgar and essentially maintained Shakespeare's first four acts although he adapted Tate's final act for his fifth. Garrick returned in 1773 and continued to reduce Tate's lines, restoring more of Shakespeare's. In 1820, Edmund Kean performed Garrick's *Lear*, but he later opted to remove the happy conclusion in his own version in 1823. Despite Kean's claims to have restored the play in 1823, he retained Tate's love scenes.⁵

William Charles Macready's production of *King Lear* in 1834 claimed to be the first to see Shakespeare's text fully restored although as Simon Palfrey notices, stage interpretations failed to fully reprise Edgar's role. Perceiving that directors instead chose to focus priority on the plight of Lear himself, Palfrey notes how Edgar has to play second-fiddle to his godfather within Macready's production, resulting in the omission of much of his lines.⁶

Similar perceptions of Edgar's treatment on the stage carried over into the twentieth century and beyond. Gamini Salgado notices how Harley Greville-Barker's 1940 production reverts to the Folio text, omitting some of Poor Tom's lines.⁷ Jude Kelly's 1995 production also cuts many of Edgar's lines, with the director arguing that portraying Edgar in a prolonged period of insanity is unthinkable. What may be useful to an actor while giving "a virtuoso performance of madness", is not, as Kelly sees it, so beneficial to those watching.⁸ In 2011, the director Ian Brown defended his decision to eliminate a large number of Poor Tom's lines, claiming that they were often "incomprehensible," while asserting that their omission would help the audience to comprehend the plot better.⁹

Indifference from the critical milieu

Response to Edgar from literary critics and scholars over the period discussed so far has been remarkably sparse, leaving the character at best for brief

⁵ I am indebted to Lynne Bradley's analysis of these productions, outlined in "Why, this is not Lear": Adaptations before the Twentieth Century," *Adapting King Lear for the Stage*, (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2010), 33-76.

⁶ Simon Palfrey, *Poor Tom: Living King Lear*, (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 2014), 23.

⁷ Gamini Salgado, *Text and Performance: King Lear*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1984), 72.

⁸ See Jonathan Croall's discussion of Kelly's production, *Performing King Lear: Gielgud to Russell Beale*, (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015), 74.

⁹ *Ibid*, 79.

consideration without discussing his general relevance to the play.¹⁰ It was not until the early 20th century that a broader response to appreciation of Edgar's importance emerged, leading to frequent, pejorative perceptions of the character.¹¹ In 1904, A.C. Bradley's reaction to Edgar is adverse, claiming he "excites the least enthusiasm."¹² In addition, the whole subplot with Edmund is dismissed by the critic as a pointless distraction. In 1947, George Orwell's sympathies for Edgar agree with Bradley's, commenting that Edmund's brother is "a superfluous character."¹³ Leo Kirschbaum's study ten years later also denies Edgar a significant part in the play, contending he is no more than a function character, a reincarnation of the classical *deus ex machina*. Furthermore, Kirschbaum believes it is misguided in attempts to explore any psychological unity in Edgar's various disguises.¹⁴ Northrop Frye, ten years after Kirschbaum, concludes that Edgar's role has virtually no consequence, his function merely to assist Lear when it was important to do so:

No one can study *King Lear* without wondering why Edgar puts on this Poor Tom act for Lear's benefit. He has to go into disguise, of course, but none of Cornwall's spies are likely to be listening, and elsewhere on the heath open conspiracy is discussed under the storm's cover . . . Poor Tom is the providence or guardian spirit that shows Lear the end of his journey to find his own nature.¹⁵

Latter day critics have taken scholars such as Frye to task. In doing so, they have investigated the linguistic dexterity within Poor Tom's disguise and, as a result, determined Edgar's importance to the play's plot. This is discussed later in this article.

Nonetheless, further negative reviews of Edgar follow Frye's and continue to diminish the characters' ethical significance. Stanley Cavell looks at the belated revelation of Edgar's disguise to Gloucester and frames this as "avoiding

¹⁰ A comprehensive overview of the reactions of critics and scholars to *King Lear*, from the seventeenth to early twentieth century, is presented by Harold Bloom ed., *Bloom's Shakespeare Through the Ages: King Lear*, (Infobase Publishing: New York, 2008), 51-138.

¹¹ A few critical responses from this period were more praiseworthy of Edgar and I will mention these assessments within my later discussion of the generally more favourable critical acceptance of the character which took place within the latter half of the twentieth century.

¹² A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth*, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1904, reprinted in 1929), 244.

¹³ George Orwell, "Lear, Tolstoy, and the Fool," *The Orwell Reader: Fiction, Essays and Reportage by George Orwell*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1956), 306.

¹⁴ Leo Kirschbaum, "Banquo and Edgar," *Essays in Criticism*, VII (1957): 1-21.

¹⁵ Northrop Frye, "King Lear," *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*, ed. R. Sandler, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 106.

recognition,”¹⁶ tying the son to the evil intentions of brother Edmund. The critic also questions Lear’s own label of Edgar as “unaccommodated man” (*KL*, 3.4.113-115). Cavell refutes the idea that Edgar is perceived as a somewhat innocent aid and counsellor to Lear’s plight, as the character sees his disguise as calculated. Edgar has no ethical authority, as Cavell points to an increasing self-assurance in Edgar in act five that “mocks his Christian thoroughness.”¹⁷ Marvin Rosenberg also perceives Edgar as anything but virtuous. As a result, he constantly questions Edgar’s motives throughout the play, concluding that the character is the victim of a disposition to rage and “hates well.”¹⁸

Other voices have also emerged, continuing into our present century, questioning Edgar’s ethical propriety. Harry Berger Jr. sees an element of cruelty within Edgar’s reaction to his father’s blindness while playing the beggar, Poor Tom. Pointing to the lines “the foul fiend Flibbertigibbet . . . / [who] gives the web and pin, squinies the eye,” (3.4.115-117) Berger sees this as a reference to Gloucester’s new-found plight. Furthermore it is Edgar, the critic believes, who continues to conduct “his own trial” of his father, culminating in the manipulative treatment of the elder at the cliffs of Dover.¹⁹ A.D. Nuttall comments on this particular scene while examining how Edgar has tricked his father into believing he is now keeping the company of devils following his suicide bid. Edgar’s deception is part of what Nuttall believes to be a brilliant “theatrical stratagem . . . infected with moral dubiety,” investing the character with a force that is anything but holy.²⁰

Textual scholarship: the focus on Edgar’s ethical significance

Despite the tendency of some in the critical milieu to continue to cast doubt on Edgar, a movement had already begun that would not only cast a favourable light on the character’s ethical importance but would favor a shift in his critical acceptance. In the second half of the twentieth century, *King Lear* became the actual instrument of the textual revolution, now referred to as editorial revisionism. This editorial trend challenges many emanations commonly introduced in successive editions of Shakespeare’s works, including conflations of various existing versions of the play. Needless to say, *King Lear* became the chief case in point. In my own belief that the final lines do indeed confer on Edgar an ethical authority from the

¹⁶ Stanley Cavell, “The Avoidance of Love,” *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 283.

¹⁷ Cavell, 285.

¹⁸ Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of King Lear*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 245.

¹⁹ Harry Berger, Jr., “Text against Performance: The Gloucester Family Romance,” *Shakespeare’s “Rough Magic”: Renaissance Essays in Honor of C.L. Barber*, ed. Peter Erickson and Coppélia Khan, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985), 222.

²⁰ Anthony David Nuttall, *Shakespeare The Thinker*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 311.

point of view of the structure of the plot of *King Lear*, I wish first to provide the context for examining Edgar's ethical importance by outlining the ethos behind two fundamentally different approaches to establishing which text of the play best represents Shakespeare's conception. The two authoritative texts of Shakespeare's play published are, firstly, the 1608 Quarto (Q) printed by Nicholas Okes for Nathaniel Butter, and the 1623 Folio (F), printed by Isaac Jaggard for a consortium of publishers which collects thirty-six plays. These two texts differ in composition; Q is missing 102 lines not found in F, while F is missing 285 lines not found in Q.

The theory of authorial revision as an explanation for the play's textual problems, was initiated by Michael Warren in his 1978 essay "Quarto and Folio in *King Lear* and the Interpretation of Albany and Edgar." Here he posits that a comparison of the differences in speech between these characters in Q and F shows that a revision has taken place. The role Edgar plays has been expanded in F at the expense of Albany's importance in Q. Furthermore, the omissions in F are seen as part of a deliberate strategy to weaken Albany's stature. In 1980, Gary Taylor identifies another revision strategy in the differences between Q and F: Some of F's cuts and variants aim to accelerate the momentum of action toward war.²¹ In another book from the same year, Steven Urkowitz's *Shakespeare's Revision of King Lear*, claims that Shakespeare revised Q to produce a new version, F, which would be more effective on the stage. Urkowitz identifies theatrical economy, practicality, and theatrical inventiveness as the fundamental approach of revision underlying the updated version. Later that same year, a seminar of the Shakespeare Association debated the differences between Q and F and the essays presented at that seminar were collected in a volume entitled *The Division of the Kingdoms: Shakespeare's Two Versions of King Lear*, edited by Gary Taylor and Michael Warren, and was published in 1983.²²

However, it is the opinion of a group of critics, recently voiced through Sir Brian Vickers, that these missing sections in Q and F are not due to the author's revision, but are instead:

different and complimentary. If you were to complete either version by adding passages preserved by the other, you would have, in terms of characters and

²¹ Gary Taylor, "The War in King Lear," *Shakespeare Survey*, Vol. 33 (1980); 28.

²² Most of the essays in *The Division of the Kingdoms* are devoted to studying F and identifying revision strategies. Almost all contributors view the majority of the differences between Q and F as part of Shakespeare's revision strategy to diminish the importance of Kent, reshape the character of Goneril, revise the role of the king, and re-cast the Fool from a natural or idiot into a wise, sarcastic jester. In 1986, the publication of the *Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works* put into practice the assumptions of the authorial revision theory. The editors, Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, decided to publish the Q and F texts of *King Lear* independently as two separate plays, giving the authorial revision theory the status of a new orthodox editorial practice.

events, two identical plays. The texts would still differ in many textual variants . . . but they would contain the same play.²³

Such conflationist views, as they are called, therefore argue that the merging of Q and F is the only way to proceed if we are to regain an approximation of what Shakespeare really wrote.

These views held by Vickers and others²⁴ are criticized by those who suggest Shakespeare revised the play. The revisionist's first assumption is that Shakespeare wrote two versions of *King Lear*. The second is that the originally lost *King Lear* is an archetypal construct, an invention of earlier Shakespearean scholarship. The third is that the practice of "conflation" rests on "bardolatry," being based "upon the principle that not a line which appears to have been written by Shakespeare ought to be lost."²⁵ The fourth assumption is that Q and F are autonomous texts that should be edited, published, read, interpreted, and performed separately. The final assumption is that Q offers Shakespeare's initial thoughts and a more literary version, while F offers Shakespeare's second thoughts and probably represents actual theatrical practice.

Although the construction of *King Lear* is seen from two opposing interpretative points of view, both revisionist and conflationist textual scholars find agreement regarding the importance of Edgar in their belief in the ethical authority borne out in Edgar's role. No more is this exemplified in their examination of the final lines of the play (5.3.322-325) where Q attributes these to Albany and F attributes them to Edgar.²⁶ Sir Brian Vickers, who maintains that the folio was not revised by Shakespeare but by compositors who had better access to Shakespeare's manuscripts than before, describes the attribution of the last lines in F to Edgar as a way of giving him greater importance.²⁷ Furthermore, Vickers asserts that Edgar's lines are not only emotionally charged but also convey an ethical propriety, becoming a commentary on the suffering that everyone in the play has to endure.²⁸ For Vickers, Q is flawed in denying this speech to Edgar while "the Folio got

²³ Sir Brian Vickers, *The One King Lear*, (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2016), ix.

²⁴ For example, see Robert Clare, "Quarto and Folio: A Case for Conflation," *Lear from Study to Stage: Essays in Criticism*, ed. J. Ogden, A.H. Scouten and A.H. Mendison, (Madison, USA, and London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Associated University Presses, 1997), 79-108.

²⁵ Charles Knight, *The Pictorial Edition of the Works of Shakespeare*, Vol. 6, 1843, 392, cited by Stanley Wells in Taylor and Warren (1983, 8).

²⁶ In F these are: EDGAR The weight of this sad time we must obey,
 Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
 The oldest hath borne most; we that are young
 Shall never see so much, nor live so long. (KL 5.3.322-325).

²⁷ Vickers, 295.

²⁸ Vickers, 296.

it right.”²⁹ Richard Knowles, another “conflationist,” advocates Edgar’s ethical authority at the end of the play, noting that the final lines attributed to Edgar in F stress Edgar’s “final dominance” especially following Albany’s abdication.³⁰ For the revisionist Michael Warren, Edgar’s claims to the crown and an ethical authority in Q are otherwise unconvincing because he has not reached maturity and is broken by the end of the play.³¹ It is only when we attribute Edgar’s final lines in F, Warren adds, that we see a character who emerges as a capable leader, allowing Albany to achieve his goal of avoiding rule.³² A fellow revisionist, Gary Taylor, believes that the final lines of the piece in F are quite clear in giving Edgar an ethical status. Here, Taylor adds, we witness the belief that it was Edgar who acted “the role of chief moral survivor” with greater aplomb than Kent or Albany.³³ Steven Urkowitz does not go as far as Warren and Taylor did in specifically claiming Edgar’s ethical authority, but rather it is implied in his reading of the diminution of Albany in F: “This scene resolves the issue of Albany’s suitability as a ruler at the end of the play, and it provides important clues for understanding Albany’s two acts of abdication.”³⁴

Increasing testimony to Edgar’s ethical significance

Aside from the arguments of textual scholars advocating for Edgar’s virtues, additional support for Edgar’s ethical significance emerged in the field of literary criticism during the latter half of the twentieth century. Before examining these claims, it is notable how these newer voices helped to revive the scarcer praises of some earlier advocates for the character dating back to the nineteenth century, such as Edward Dowden. He comments on Edgar being an adroit “resister of evil, the champion of right to the utterance . . . advancing the good cause.”³⁵ G. Wilson Knight, some fifty or so years later, also clearly sees Edgar as an important representative of an ethical authority. During the later parts of *King Lear*, Wilson Knight feels that Edgar’s lines become especially significant, deserving the mantle

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Richard Knowles, “Two Lears? By Shakespeare?” *Lear from Study to Stage: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Ogden, J., A.H. Scouten and A.H. Mendison, (USA and London: Farleigh Dickinson University Press and Associated University Presses, 1997), 71.

³¹ Michael J. Warren, “Quarto and Folio *King Lear* and the Interpretation of Albany and Edgar,” *Shakespeare, Pattern of Excelling Nature: Shakespearean Criticism in Honor of America’s Bicentennial*, eds. D. Bevington and J.L. Halio, (London: Associated University Presses, 1978), 105.

³² Ibid.

³³ Gary Taylor, “*King Lear*: The Date and Authorship of the Folio Version,” *The Division of the Kingdoms*, 425.

³⁴ Steven Urkowitz, *Shakespeare’s Revision of King Lear*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 104.

³⁵ Edward Dowden, “Lear,” *Shakspere: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art*, (London: Henry S. King & Co., 1875), 270.

of “the high-priest of the *Lear* religion: a voice, a choric moralizer.”³⁶ Commenting on the end of the play, Wilson Knight views Edgar as a powerful symbolic, moralising force within the play, evident in his use of the trumpet that calls for Edmund to account himself. The trumpet, Wilson claims, is a “symbol of natural judgement . . . sounding through the *Lear* mist from which right and wrong at this moment emerge distinct.”³⁷

Maynard Mack takes up the case for Edgar’s moral virtues some thirty-five years later, echoing his two literary forebears and pre-empting those similar conclusions made by textual scholars that were to occur just a few years later. Mack believes that in Edgar we see a character ascribed with a great degree of ethical significance. In this critic’s eyes, we witness Edgar’s “unblinking attitude toward his father’s transgressions and his strict code of retribution.”³⁸ It is also in the disguise of Poor Tom, Mack adds, where we can see that his language and deeds connect him to “the hero figure of the Moralities after this figure has fallen on evil days and ways.”³⁹

Quite recently, Tom Clayton’s reaction to Edgar is one influenced by the debates of the textual scholars. While focusing on the character’s ethical virtues, Clayton believes they centre around:

his best qualities: his endurance, his care of his father, his life as a make-believe madman, his maturing with experience, his moral and philosophical observations (especially in Q), and his status at the end of the play.⁴⁰

It is Q, he contends, which is therefore is a better guide to assessing Edgar’s moral significance. Furthermore, critical to a positive reception of Edgar, Clayton adds, is the perception that Edgar needs to perform decisive deeds when it comes to instances where violence is warranted, first in the case of Oswald and later Edmund in the final act.⁴¹

Revisiting the title of the play

Concurrent with Edgar’s more recent, elevated assessment of his moral significance, other contemporary critics⁴² have emphasized the character’s

³⁶ G. Wilson Knight, “The *Lear* Universe,” *The Wheel of Fire*, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1930), 197.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 185.

³⁸ Maynard Mack, *King Lear in Our Time*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, USA: University of California Press, 1965), 61.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Tom Clayton, “‘The injuries that they themselves procure’: Justice poetic and pragmatic, and aspects of the endplay, in *King Lear*,” *King Lear: New Critical Essays*, ed. J. Kahn, (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 192.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Earlier recognition of the Quarto’s subtitle and its significance in highlighting the importance of Edgar’s role is discussed by Thomas. M. Parrott, *Shakespearean Comedy*,

importance to the play through his inclusion in Q's title page⁴³ which provides, in William Carroll's words, an "equal billing"⁴⁴ for Edgar. It reads:

M. William Shak-speare: His True Chronicle Historie of the life and death of King LEAR and his three Daughters. *With the unfortunate life of EDGAR, sonne and heire to the Earle of Gloster, and his sullen and assumed humor of TOM of Bedlam.*⁴⁵

Carroll concludes that even if Shakespeare himself had not thought of this title, the vitality and "notorious appeal" of Edgar would still have been appreciated by theatre-goers.⁴⁶ Furthermore, in the attributes ascribed to Edgar within the title – "the sonne and heire" and "sullen and assumed humor of Tom of Bedlam" – Carroll believes these help to demarcate the character's "cultural" possibilities.⁴⁷

Harold Bloom (usually less concerned with purely textual inquires) notices that the Q's double title "assigns a prominence to Edgar rarely afforded him in our critical studies"⁴⁸ Bloom later contends that audiences and readers are mistaken in apportioning greater significance to either the Fool or Edmund and should direct their attention towards Edgar, who stands to lead the new realm.⁴⁹

Twenty-first century analyses of the title page have continued to reveal support for Edgar. Stanley Wells believes that the character's inclusion within Q could well signify that the role had been effectively acted, scoring "a hit."⁵⁰ Simon Palfrey interprets the double title of the play, believing Edgar's narrative deserves equal billing, conferring something quite perplexing and mysterious about the character who seems invested in "some tantalizing phantom quality bound up in the nonfigure who closes the title."⁵¹

(New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), 297, Leo Kirschbaum, "Banquo and Edgar: Character or Function?" *Essays in Criticism*, 1957, Vol. VII: 1-21., and Russell A. Peck, "Edgar's Pilgrimage: High Comedy in King Lear," *Studies in English Literature. 1500-1900*. Vol. 7, No. 2, *Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama* (Spring, 1967): 219-237.

⁴³ In the 1623 Folio the double title has been changed to simply read 'The Tragedie of King Lear'.

⁴⁴ William C. Carroll, "'The Base Shall Top Th'Legitimate;': The Bedlam Beggar and the Role of Edgar in *King Lear*," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No.4 (Winter): 427.

⁴⁵ *King Lear* 1608 (*Pied Bull Quarto*), ed. W. W. Greg (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939).

⁴⁶ Carroll, 428.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 427.

⁴⁸ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare and the Invention of the Human*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 480.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 481.

⁵⁰ Stanley Wells, *The Oxford Shakespeare: The History of King Lear*, ed. S. Wells, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 56.

⁵¹ Simon Palfrey, *Poor Tom: Living King Lear*, (London and Chicago: The University of Chicago Press Ltd, 2011), 18-19.

Continuing critical acceptance and foregrounding of Edgar

Aside from those reflections on Edgar's role within the textual revisions and title pages of *King Lear*, additional and extensive analyses of the character have appeared from within the same era, affording prominence to the character within the play while exploring a number of hitherto overlooked themes. Of note is Stephen Greenblatt's 1988 essay "Shakespeare and the Exorcists."⁵² Central to Greenblatt's analysis of Edgar is his own prior analysis of Shakespeare's play in conjunction with one of its widely claimed sources, Samuel Harsnett's *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (1603).⁵³ The inclusion of this text, Greenblatt asserts, is to use Edgar's Poor Tom disguise as a mouthpiece for refuting the validity of Catholic exorcist practices. Within his disguise, Greenblatt comments on the frequent recital of an array of devils' names that have been conjured up to seem exotic, implying a degree of unbelievability and thereby emphasizing the degree of fraudulence within this set of religious rituals.⁵⁴

Ten years later, Harold Bloom addresses the degree of loathing that Stanley Cavell had felt about Edgar. Bloom stresses the need to disagree with Cavell that Edgar is a character existing on the side of weakness and murderous intent.⁵⁵ However, he does not wish to argue Edgar's importance within claims of ethical authority; Bloom had already made clear in a previous essay that Cordelia is a more appropriate example of Christian virtue.⁵⁶ Instead, the key to understanding this character, Bloom claims, is to see him as "a genius for negativity," his ability to descend from nobility into the low-caste state of the beggar. Furthermore, it is the concept of negation which is key to the playwright's conciliation between "the sublime and the grotesque" which finds its representation in Edgar, Bloom concludes.⁵⁷

⁵² Stephen Greenblatt, "Shakespeare and the Exorcists," *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, (Los Angeles, USA: University of California Press, 1988), 94-128.

⁵³ Greenblatt refers to accounts of Harsnett's relation to *Lear* in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, 8 vols. ed. G. Bullough, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958-75) 7: 299-302; Kenneth Muir, "Samuel Harsnett and *King Lear*," *Review of English Studies* 2 (1951): 11-21, and Muir's edition of *Lear*, New Arden text, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1952): 253-256.

⁵⁴ Greenblatt, 117.

⁵⁵ Harold Bloom, "Introduction by Harold Bloom," *Bloom's Shakespeare Through the Ages: King Lear*, ed. H. Bloom, (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008), xi-xii.

⁵⁶ Harold Bloom, "Introduction," from *King Lear* (Major Literary Characters), in *Bloom's Shakespeare Through the Ages: King Lear*, 313.

⁵⁷ Bloom, "Introduction by Harold Bloom," xii. See also, Russell A. Peck, "Edgar's Pilgrimage: High Comedy in *King Lear*." Peck also chooses to assess Edgar beyond the debates of ethical significance; the character's greatness is bound up within his ability to "behold and feel" the sufferings of his fellows (236).

William C. Carroll is one of several critics desiring to conduct a re-investigation of Edgar's disguise of Poor Tom, claiming that in doing so, the appreciation of the character's role in the play becomes more apparent.⁵⁸ In Tom's suffering body, Carroll adds, the audience is aware of the play's preoccupation with examining "the human body's place in the natural and social orders."⁵⁹ Simon Palfrey's *Poor Tom: Living King Lear* (2011) also focuses on exploring the link between Edgar and Poor Tom. The author is keen to address a character to whom Shakespeare devotes more lines than anyone but Lear himself. Edgar strikes Palfrey as seeming no more than a desolate, abandoned, unappreciated, belated moralizer who fails to communicate the theme of heartbreak within the play. Subsequently, Palfrey asks us to go beyond such conventional wisdom and experience *King Lear* like never before. He argues that Edgar is Shakespeare's most profound examination in a character's portrayal, and his most comprehensive model of both human and theatrical possibility. The key to the Edgar character is that he spends most of the play disguised, much of it as "Poor Tom of Bedlam," and his disguises come to life in a remarkable way.⁶⁰ The Edgar role is always more than one person; it activates, according to Palfrey, a myriad of characters, past and present and future, animating states of being beyond the senses, some of which appear supernatural, or possible rather than real. Palfrey believes that because the Edgar role both connects and reframes all the characters and scenes in *King Lear*, paying attention to this particular part can shed new light on how the play as a whole works.

Edgar's use of disguise, frequently questioned and so severely constrained by stage practitioners by the deletion of many lines from Poor Tom, was warmly embraced by film and theater directors of the late 20th century and more recently. Grigori Kozinstev's 1970 cinematic adaptation of *King Lear* is supported by his own lecture which claims that the speeches of the Bedlam beggar provide an authentic voice to our modern reality, a recognizable connection between extremity and violence.⁶¹ We recognize, he adds, the dispossessed figure of Poor Tom within a world where "there is nothing to eat and no shelter."⁶² R.A. Foakes notices how Adrian Noble's 1993 production at the Royal Shakespeare Company, helps to augment Edgar's disguise, adding fresh appeal to audiences. This lies within,

⁵⁸ Also see Hugh McClean, "Disguise in *King Lear*: Kent and Edgar," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No.1 (Winter): 49-54. While focusing on Edgar's disguise and revealing some insights into the character, he chooses not to discuss the relevance of Edgar's role to the rest of the play.

⁵⁹ Carroll, 426.

⁶⁰ I also explore Edgar's use of both sartorial and verbal disguise in chapter two of my PhD thesis, "Incognitos: Shakespeare's Uses of Disguise in the Light of New Historicism and Its Legacy," PhD diss., (University of Warsaw, 2021).

⁶¹ Grigori Kozinstev, "*Hamlet* and *King Lear*; 'Stage and Film,'" Shakespeare, 1971 eds. C. Leech and J.M.R. Margeson, (Toronto, 1972) quoted in Gamini Salgado, *Text and Performance: King Lear*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1984), 58.

⁶² Ibid.

Foakes claims, Noble being able to enhance “our sense of the complexity” about the character as we comprehend the disparity between what is said and what is done. No more is this realized, Foakes adds, in Noble’s decision to have Edgar blind Oswald, appearing in the process, to avenge the blinding of Gloucester.⁶³ The stage director, Barry Kyle, commenting on his own 2001 stage production, echoes the views of critics William Carroll and Simon Palfrey in championing Edgar’s preoccupation in the disguised role of Poor Tom. The beggar’s role, Kyle adds, is significant as the disguise itself “becomes a pathway to psychosis.”⁶⁴ The appeal to audiences, Kyle concludes, is that Edgar’s disguise is something that the character realises he is unable to throw off.

Conclusion

From the publication of *King Lear* in the First Folio of 1623 and well into the twentieth century, the critical and textual reception of Edgar had largely condemned the character to a marginal status within the play. There remained a reaction of bewilderment to his disguise of Poor Tom, leading to the decisions of many stage practitioners not only to omit large sections of these lines but also re-design Edgar’s role, diminishing the importance and relevance of the character to the plot of the play. Concurrent with these practices, scholars and critics also continued to question the relevance of Edgar’s characterization of the Bedlam beggar, often concluding that the performance was unnecessary and protracted. Indeed, there is still belief among some stage interpreters to this very day who still contest the validity of Poor Tom to the play. However, the 1970’s marked the beginning of a major transformation of Edgar’s fortunes as there soon emerged an increased acceptance by scholars, critics, and stage directors. The catalyst was the debates among textual scholars of the play, conferring an elevation in Edgar’s status. His new-found prominence partly rested on those scholars advocating an ethical authority for the character, supported by others within critical circles. Edgar’s reputation continued to be buoyed by those investigating the play’s Quarto title page. Clearly, they felt, Edgar deserved a double billing with Lear himself; there simply had to be significance in the number of lines originally attributed to Edgar (whether in the Quarto or Folio texts) and his disguise as Poor Tom. This inspired further critical analysis of Edgar and led to some fruitful conclusions regarding his vitality to the play. Some believed him to be a spokesperson for fraudulent Catholic practices, decrying the popularity of exorcist practices in church. Others, chose to focus on his use of disguise and look to his commanding employment of voices, an impressive heteroglossia, that helped mask Edgar from fear of recognition of those around him. Despite remaining traces of indifference to Poor Tom’s lines from some stage interpreters, a new enthusiasm for Edgar’s vocal dexterity was

⁶³ R.A. Foakes, “Performance and Text: ‘*King Lear*,’” *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England*, Vol. 17 (2005): 97.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Jonathan Croall, *Performing King Lear: Gielgud to Russell Beale*, 115.

eventually conveyed by others. Edgar's role was to be respected and re-stored as best possible, preserving the vitality of Poor Tom's suffering to the stage, to see it as a mirror to the plight of those who today, continue to struggle within society, begging for food and shelter. Key to the ordeal of Poor Tom is the voice of Edgar himself, enacting his disguise, ensuring that it is capable of achieving recognition within theatregoers who are already aware of the suffering and violence that we have come to recognize within today's world.

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