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Abstract

Most scholarship interrogating the role of disability in *King Lear* has aimed to examine the conditions and reality of King Lear's madness; a select portion of this scholarship has gone so far as to claim disability as a central, unifying component of the play. Disability's presence in the play is given from the first scene, but how these disabled characters will be treated remains the central conflict for every character. Even among scholarship that investigates disabilities other than King Lear's deteriorating condition, inadequate attention has been paid to the social conditions of the various disabled characters. Namely, who is and who is not cared for in their disabled state? A reader hoping to elucidate the condition of caretakers in the play necessarily reckons with disguise: as a banished Kent returns to care for his disgraced King and as the Bedlam Beggar version of Edgar assists his father in his final moments, it is unclear what the effective component of their care acts is. How are these two characters, unknown to the people they care for, able to instill a sense of safety and comfort in their dependents?

Keywords: disability, disguise, identity, *King Lear,* Shakespeare

A disguised and unnamed Kent meets King Lear in Act 1 Scene 4, and twice he is asked "What art thou?" Initially, Kent responds, "A man, sir", but he expands his second answer into "A very honest-hearted fellow, and as poor as the King" (1.4.9-20). In Act 4 Scene 6, Gloucester asks this same question of his son, Edgar, disguised as Poor Tom; Poor Tom answers, "A most poor man, made tame to fortunes blows, / Who, by the art of known and feeling sorrows, / Am pregnant to good pity. Give me your hand; / I'll lead you to some biding" (4.6.217-220). There are far more similarities between these characters: they are both disguised, unable to reveal their identities in their homes and around those they are close to. Both relate themselves to madness, one intentionally returning to care for the escalating condition of his King and the other assuming the character of a madman as a logical defensive strategy. Both find themselves in caretaker positions for people who are unaware of their identities. Both transgress preestablished character relations, Edgar prematurely becoming the caretaker of his father and Kent assuming a position of relative authority over his former king, as Lear descends into madness and emotional dependance after his familial abandon. Last in this non-exhaustive list, is that both toy with social standards and expectations, Edgar willingly assuming madness as an identity and Kent bursting into an outrageous fit at Oswald, landing him in the stocks until Lear arrives.

Perhaps other characters in the play could be reasonably understood by questioning what the playwright wants from the inclusion of these characters—with Cordelia for example, one may reap a plentiful interpretive harvest from wondering why Shakespeare want us to see a disgraced, loving daughter in addition to two malicious and conniving ones. However, this approach falls short with Kent and Edgar. One might rather ask what the *characters* want from the inclusion of their disguised identities, seeing as they are in those disguises for most of the play. Why Shakespeare includes them as characters still stands as a question with interpretive value, but the characters called Kent and Edgar have far fewer appearances, lines, and interactions than do their disguised personas Caius and Poor Tom. For these two, then, it is not sufficient to wonder about their utility to Shakespeare as characters, but rather their persona's utility to each of them. One should not view Kent and Edgar as two-dimensional renderings of humans inside a story with a predetermined end, but rather as free agents in a narrative world, able to choose any route forward that they can imagine and enact, with no regard to their comprehensibility to an audience. That is not to say that these two are impenetrable from an outside perspective, but rather that they are entitled to choosing the illogical, the incongruous, and, at times, the inexplicable.

For example, Edgar and Kent, both facing some sort of exile, rationally opt for the adoption of a new character instead of the safer option of fleeing. These choices cannot be reasoned away; at least, it does not seem to me that any plot point suggests a logical reason for risking their discovery by disguising themselves rather than fleeing. In support of their status as remarkably realistic free agents, they choose the illogical, but entirely understandable option. Is it not natural to try and preserve proximity to one's family, to hold onto the smallest shred of hope that the wrongs done against you will be resolved? Why ought they resign themselves to their unearned exiles? They opt for a logically indefensible option, so long as these characters are interpreted in a logical framework where self-preservation and ease of living are held as the touchstones of decision-making. But they have opted for an intuitive and relatable option, if

they are interpreted as people with the choice to deny logical frameworks and to opt for subjective standards of decision-making, like proximity to their families.

Consequently, the audience must confront characters within characters, as Kent and Edgar assume their new identities but interact with well-known faces. Edgar's new identity is that of a madman and later the mad caretaker of his disabled father, while Kent's newly assumed identity puts him in the position of caretaker to a madman; a necessary question to be asked of these characters is what they think of and do with the concept of madness, and how they relate themselves to their own and other's intellectual capacities. This might be more aptly described as an investigation of Caius and Poor Tom rather than Kent and Edgar, since the latter two characters are only present in the first Act. Beyond that, Kent and Edgar only exist to the audience insofar as Caius is unnamed until the final scene and thus must be thought of by the audience as a disguised Kent, and insofar as Edgar reasserts to the audience his status as a disguised Edgar several times by using asides to break character and discuss his plight. As the audience learns in Act 4 Scene 7, the rest of the cast of characters believe that Kent and Edgar are together in exile in Germany (4.7.90-91).

Who are Caius and Poor Tom, then, and how do they come into being? Poor Tom is somewhat simpler to account for. For one reason or another, Edgar is entirely convinced by his brother Edmund that he must flee; he believes Edmund when he tells him that his father is angry for some unknown reason, and so angry, in fact, that Edgar must leave immediately and armed (1.2.134-176). The final scene with Edgar prior to assuming the character of Poor Tom is the first scene of Act 2, in which Edgar speaks only one line. Edmund adds that Edgar has not only unknowingly and unwillingly offended his father but also the Duke of Cornwall *and* the Duke of Albany (2.1.21-28); to the question of what inflammatory things Edgar might have said to any of these parties, Edgar responds "I am sure on't, not a word" (2.1.29). Edgar flees amidst a fictional swordfight between him and Edmund, which Edmund uses to further characterize Edgar as traitorous.

At this moment, Edgar has not been explicitly or formally exiled. He is simply in immense danger so long as he remains identifiable as Edgar. One might imagine his logical process at this moment amounting to, "Well, I could flee, and live a life in exile in which no one would be able to contact me or find me if I were ever allowed to return. Or I could disguise myself and stay here, in which case I might hear about or plan a conducive time to restore my identity and honor." A scene later, the audience learns that the prior option is not viable when Edgar describes how he has "Escaped the hunt. No port is free, no place / That guard and most unusual vigilance / Does not attend my taking" (2.2.172-176). Not only would exile mean a permanent separation from his former life, but it is logistically impossible, seeing as the "hunt" against him surpasses reasonable expectation, suggested by the phrase "unusual vigilance". While he and the audience may have expected the violent pursuit of Edgar as a traitor, both parties are surprised to hear it characterized as a "hunt", one in which all flight from the country is barred due to the ubiquitous and unified effort to apprehend him. Edgar's surprise at this moment should be understood as far surpassing that of the audience's; the audience knows the inflammatory accusations made by Edmund against Edgar, while Edgar only knows that he has somehow verbally offended Gloucester, Cornwall, and Albany.

Edgar then describes his resolve to disguise himself as a Bedlam beggar. Immediately after his lines regarding the hunt and unusual vigilance, he says, "While I may scape / I will

preserve myself, and am bethought / To take the basest and most poorest shape / That ever penury in contempt of man / Brought near to beast" (2.2.176-180). In what way is he preserving himself? This line seems to suggest that Edgar, at this moment, is operating in a logical framework where self-preservation and ease of living are held as the touchstones of decision-making, the same logical framework that I earlier suggested must be rejected when evaluating Caius and Poor Tom. One cannot say that Edgar is preserving himself in terms of identity or personality, since he is taking on a new identity, and the basest and poorest possible one at that. Edgar is only preserving his ability to continue living. He is not opting for a disguise that allows him to continue doing whatever it was that made him Edgar, but rather the disguise that is most likely to keep him alive. In fact, disguised as Poor Tom, he must (so long as he is around other people) cast off his able mind and instead assume the "horrible object" (2.2.197) of the intellectually disabled. Many people, perhaps mistakenly, hold their intellectual capacities (reasoning, opinion, preference, personality) as definitive of their personhood. This is not to say that without them they would not be a person, but that without their intellectual capacities, they would be a fundamentally different person. Edgar may believe himself to be making this kind of exchange with his literary world: he relates himself to the audience by bestowing the identity of Edgar upon us, as the only people aware of his innocence, and he accepts the identity of Poor Tom from his literary world which "gives [him] proof and precedent / of Bedlam beggars" (2.2.184-185).

Without fully explicating this suggestion, it's worth noting that Edgar/Poor Tom may not be operating under the framework of mere self-preservation and ease. One might rather take the lines "Poor Turlygod, Poor Tom, / That's something yet: Edgar I nothing am" (2.2.191-192) to say that Edgar was never a substantive identity, only an amalgamation of court standards and societal expectation; thus, casting off the persona of Edgar would be an embrace of some truer identity, in this case Poor Tom. This account, while promising, still requires an investigation regarding Edgar's new need to hide his able mind from everyone around him: what did Edgar see as definitive of his character if not his ability to be understood by others?

So much for the "simpler" disguise, then. Caius presents further problems to an audience attempting to understand each character's motivations. Kent, unlike Edgar, is formally banished in the first scene of the play. Formal exile affords Kent an easier decision-making process, where he is not only able to, but expected to flee the country. Kent is very clearly outside the framework of self-preservation once he decides to disguise himself instead of fleeing. He puts himself in undeniable danger as he assumes his disguise, unless there is some reason to believe that the characters around him are unlikely to recognize his familiar voice or face. Rather than choosing an option that allows him to safely live out the remainder of his life, he chooses that which allows his "good intent [to] carry through itself to that full issue / for which [he] razed [his] likeness" (1.4.2-4). That is, Kent has a predetermined end that warrants his disguise and outweighs the inherent risk of his identity being discovered.

He finishes this soliloquy with "Now, banished Kent, / If thou canst serve where thou dost stand condemned / So may it come thy master whom thou lov'st / Shall find thee full of labours" (1.4.4-7). The most intuitive conclusion to draw from this soliloquy is that Kent's good intent is, at least in part, that Lear will find him to be useful, valuable, and potentially, lovable. It seems relevant that Kent is the only character without some blood-relation included in the play, exempting the similarly lone but almost non-existent characters of Burgundy and France. Kent's

main motivation, it seems, is mere proximity to people who hold him to be valuable, characters who can stand in as a family for him. Thus, Kent's disguise allows him another attempt at being useful and valuable to Lear. This means stepping in as a compassionate caretaker where others will not; this act also implies that Kent must have a more accurate assessment of Lear's needs and capacities than the other characters around Lear, and thus a more sensitive understanding of "madness" or intellectual disability than the other characters.

One key difference between these two assumed identities/disguises must be enumerated. While Poor Tom requires casting off almost all socially normative behaviors for the sake of appearing convincingly "mad", Caius does not. It is quite difficult to say what separates Caius from Kent. In many ways, it feels like Caius is simply a Kent that was not banished, that everyone allows to stick around. It is implied in the soliloquy in 1.4 that Kent has put on an accent and different dress, but otherwise behaves in a manner that is entirely consonant with the Kent from 1.1. This looks to me like one clear benefit of writing two characters with so many similarities. The marked difference in how their disguise relates to their identity leaves room for the audience to interpret why they are different in this regard, while so similar in every other. For now, I'll leave it in these terms: Why is it that Kent only needs to describe himself with different words, while Edgar must entirely reinvent himself? I do not think this question is answered by the different levels of danger that these characters face. Kent is not being hunted by any means, but he knows that if his disguise is discovered he will be punished by death (1.1.179). This seems to be exactly Edgar's position, the only difference being an active pursuit; pursuit does not seem to be enough to say that Edgar must forget his old identity while Kent must not.

At this moment, I understand Caius as a reappropriation of Kent, and Poor Tom as either the complete eradication of Edgar or the complete removal of all the not-Edgar. Caius and Poor Tom come into existence through vastly different circumstances: the former is an identity assumed in rejection of exile and the latter is an over-the-top disguise that indulges in Edgar's opportunity for self-exploration outside social normativity. Caius and Poor Tom also come into existence for vastly different reasons: Caius provides Kent a way of continuing to love and care for Lear and potentially be loved in return, and Poor Tom provides Edgar a convenient and safe disguise that happens to afford him a great amount of personal liberty. With this assumed, one can move forward to ask why Kent and Edgar relate to their identities in such different manners. Why was Edgar eradicated in the assumption of Poor Tom? Why was Kent banished, but Caius kept around through the heights of Lear's madness? How did the assumption of a new identity change the preexisting identities of these two characters?

The question that opened this paper was "What art thou?", asked by Gloucester and Lear of their caretakers, once at the beginning and once at the end of the play. Edgar answers that "by the art of known and feeling sorrows, / [he is] pregnant to good pity", suggesting that by assuming the character of Poor Tom he learned some truth that led him to a heightened capacity for pity or empathy. In this moment, he decides to aid his blind father through the final moments of his life, which ends off-stage and is only passingly mentioned by Edgar in the last Act. Only a few lines later, he describes "the banished Kent, who in disguise / Followed his enemy king and did him service / improper for a slave" (5.3.218-220). For some reason, Edgar makes a distinction between Poor Tom's care for his blind father (whose rash behavior and gullibility, in part, forced Edgar to become Poor Tom) and Caius's care for Lear, calling Lear an

“enemy king” and Kent’s support of him as “improper for a slave.” Regan suggests something similar at 2.2.134 when Kent asserts that she would not treat Lear’s dog as poorly as she treats Caius, and she responds by implying that being Lear’s knave is worse than being his dog. What leads these characters to scorn Kent’s care for Lear in his deteriorating condition, but to revere Edgar’s commitment to his blind and suicidal father?

Regarding Kent and Edgar as an intentional character pairing, I believe that the investigation moving forward should not be one of madness alone, but of disability generally. It ought to be asked what Edgar is doing when he assumes the identity of Poor Tom, what Poor Tom is doing when he lies to and manipulates the blind Gloucester; what Kent believes he is doing when he lies to Lear, and what Lear thinks of this man that has randomly appeared to care for him in his madness. The investigation then might expand beyond Kent and Edgar, to ask what determines the condition of disability in this play: is it one’s treatment by others, or one’s own understanding of one’s capabilities? Either way, it seems that Kent and Edgar are the key to disability in the narrative world of *King Lear*.

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