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King Lear and the Catholic Drama of Three Households and Four Loves

“That word love, which greybeards call divine.”

HENRY VI, PART III

HARDLY ANYONE NOW READS the world's greatest work of literature for its dramatization of Catholic wisdom. By the 1960s, according to R. A. Foakes, critical opinion had crowned *King Lear* as Shakespeare's greatest play, and it is still indeed common to hear it maintained that *Lear* is the greatest work of literature ever written in any language. Foakes attributes this rise mainly to the apocalyptic and nihilistic mood of the Cold War. And yet during the same period, he points out, the accepted reading of *Lear* changed from that of a play concerned with a “pilgrimage to redemption” to one offering “Shakespeare's bleakest and most despairing vision of suffering, all hints of consolation undermined or denied.”¹

It is not surprising that a nihilistic, skeptical age would see only nihilism and skepticism in *King Lear*. To be sure, the play has some of the ugliest, darkest minutes in all of literature: two ungrateful daughters strip their aged father of his property and drive him outdoors unprotected into a raging storm as he declines into raving madness; a betrayed spy of the state has both eyes gouged out on stage, one

in cruel jest; a father reconciled to his only loving daughter finds her hanged right after their reconciliation, and another father suffers from a broken heart when he learns that he has wronged his loving son; throughout it all, the cosmic order seems indifferent and even hostile.

This pessimistic action, however, is less than half the story. Consider these events, which are much more than “hints of consolation”: the two ungrateful and evil sisters perish in their own iniquity by poisoning and suicide; an evil son, “touched by love,” albeit adulterous, recognizes his sinfulness and countermands his execution order with a last-minute (although too late) pardon, a radical act of gratuitous mercy; an unjustly treated son ministers to the very father, himself unjustly blinded, who has mistreated him, with no hope of reward and no effort to reveal his identity, in yet another radical act of gratuitous mercy; a banished suffering servant continues to serve the very king who has banished him for truth-telling at the risk of his own life, being put in the stocks, like Charity in a morality play, turning treason into love; a king’s hired fool loves the king to the point of a broken heart despite the king’s foolishness and the imperatives of his own clear-eyed worldly wisdom; and there are numerous other acts of redemption. In the final reckoning, all the evil characters die, but some of the good ones survive. How can so many modern interpreters remain unmoved by this catalog of consolations? It is as if King Lear’s famous last words (in the Folio edition), which declare the glorious resurrection of his beloved daughter, “Look, look there!” fall on blinded eyes, to mix a metaphor, those of our own narrowed age that cannot see the “mystery of things” glimpsed by Cordelia and Lear in their reconciliation.

A modern skeptic may look at the bountiful unbidden generosity of Edgar, the Fool, Albany, Kent, Edmund, Cordelia, and Lear and see nothing but human beings who express simple human compassion for victims of catastrophe, but Shakespeare saw it, I believe, because he saw human beings in the Christian light of fallen nature, redeemed possibility, resurrected hope—in a word, as touched by

God's grace. He was not a Buddhist who saw the world as illusion, a secular humanitarian like Camus's Rieux who sought to combine enjoyment of the world with service to humanity, a Talmudic rabbi who looked for halachic clarity and purity in daily living, but rather a baptized Christian, married and buried as a Christian and perhaps according to Roman rites, whose deeply formed manner of thinking followed Christian dramatic lines and categories. For Shakespeare, traditional Christianity is mere Catholicism.

What is the worth of forgiveness, reconciliation, and redemption, however momentarily comforting, when the heavens are silent? The answer to this question, Shakespeare's answer, is one that has not been fully appreciated. When the theater was restored, *Lear* was seriously bowdlerized by pious performances after Nahum Tate in 1702, and Cordelia did not die for over a hundred and fifty years of performances. At the other extreme, the modern nihilistic performances à la Peter Brooks (1970 was the year of the famous film version, and even the more generous Royal Shakespeare Company production in the 2011 Lincoln Center Summer Festival was still in this nihilistic tradition) minimize or suppress redemptive aspects, sometimes push the darkest interpretations such as having the Fool commit suicide, and even cut key redemptive passages, such as eliminating Edmund's deathbed change of heart or the report of Gloucester's happy death—bowdlerizing, one is tempted to say, not to protect wholesome Victorian families from Shakespeare's bawdiness but to shield audiences from Shakespeare's Christian formation and orientation. What is missed is the full force of the play, love layered among the bleak ruins.

God is love, St. John tells us, and in *Lear* God speaks through the layers of love expressed by his loving creatures. C. S. Lewis's famous analysis, *The Four Loves*, can show the fullness of Shakespeare's vision, which was apocalyptic in the sense of Christian hope. Although not Catholic, Lewis is known for his clarity and represents a "great lay theologian of our present day" in conformity with Augustine, Aquinas, Francis de Sales, and Leibniz, according to Thomist

Joseph Pieper.² Shakespeare is in agreement with the mainstream of Catholic Christian tradition not merely because he might have read Christian theology but because in plumbing the depths of human and supernatural love he touched Christian truth. In this same Catholic tradition, G. K. Chesterton and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI can shed additional light on Shakespeare's spiritual mastery of love.

The Mother and the Home

The cradle of love, Catholic wisdom teaches, is the family at home, and it is the mother who makes the home. Chesterton argues poetically for the natural justice of this traditional state of affairs in *What's Wrong With the World*. The mother is the wise generalist who has to teach the child not something but everything. She is ordered by tradition following the natural law to develop Chesterton's version of human history: the real fairy tale of love. She must "smatter the tongues of men and angels" and "dabble in the dreadful sciences" and juggle with "frantic and flaming suns"³ to bring order and life to the family, that institution of "ancient and anarchic intimacy" (Chesterton, 44). Men, he claims, are usually either shiftless drunkards or specialized monomaniacs—and so not to be trusted with humanity's present and future, which are sustained through labor-intensive child-rearing. Thus, the home is the first chapter in Christendom's love story, and the good regime, whether in "Switzerland or Siam" (44), is merely the one that allows familial love to generate and flourish. The home is the primary household, the locus and hearth of love, where affection is engendered, transmitted, and learned through a mother's smile.

One striking fact of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, noted by many critics, is the radical absence of motherhood. Not one household contains a mother, no mother appears on stage, several absent or irregular mothers are mentioned, curses upon motherhood are unleashed, all the women but one are singular in their barrenness, hardness, and specialization in governance, a role traditionally reserved for men. Feminist criticism of *Lear* in particular has observed this absence and

accused the text and Shakespeare himself of “patriarchal misogyny” in Kathleen McLuskie’s language. She argues that the play sees family roles as fixed by nature, with the father’s role being to protect the kingdom from primal chaos, and so for her Cordelia’s saving love does not so much redeem Goneril’s and Regan’s selfishness and cruelty to their father as restore his usurped patriarchy.⁴

The traditionalist side of the argument, however, would not emphasize the usurped specialist father but seek out the missing universalist mother. It would focus not on the women turned into generals and rulers of the world but on the men turned into nurses on the heath and at Dover cliff, not on women punished for doing men’s work but on men redeemed for doing women’s work. This maternal absence, so palpable as to be in fact a deforming presence, does much to explain the great themes of the play: confused and defective love, and households out of order.

The springboard for both the main plot and subplot of *King Lear*, in fact, is adulterous motherlessness, both suspected and admitted. Lear’s deceased wife and his daughters’ mother has three mentions in the play, and in all three adultery lurks. After Kent is set free from the stocks, Regan appears and says she is “glad to see your highness,” and Lear responds to her in the second person intimate:

If thou shouldst not be glad,
I would divorce me from thy mother’s tomb
sepulchering an adulteress.
(1.2.319–21)⁵

In act 1, Lear had called Goneril a “degenerate bastard” (1.4.245). In act 4, Kent wonders how “one self mate and make” could “beget such different issues” as Cordelia, Goneril, and Regan (4.3.35). Adultery may be only a baseless fear of Kent’s sympathy or a fantasy of Lear’s deranged mind, but it is a famous constant: “Let copulation thrive!” Lear says (4.6.112) when he forgives Gloucester’s sexual sin as Jesus pardons the woman taken in adultery in the Gospel of John 8:3–11.

In the subplot, Edmund's acknowledged "bastardy" has alienated him not only from the household of Gloucester but also from nurture itself (whence "nature" is his "goddess") for nine years. Adultery, whether suggested or outright, is a trailing indicator of the broken homes in *Lear*.

Storge and Eros in the Primary Households

Like Chesterton, Lewis begins with the family, where the most basic and most animal love grows: *storge*, or affection, illustrated by the image of a mother nursing a baby.⁶ Lewis makes a crucial further distinction even in this elemental first love between "gift-love" and "need-love." His example of affective gift-love is "that love which moves a man to work and plan and save for the future well-being of his family which he will die without sharing or seeing"; his example of affective need-love is that love "which sends a lonely or frightened child to its mother's arms" (Lewis, 1). Affection, like all natural loves, can resemble God's love as gift-love but often becomes demonic when this gift-love itself becomes a need-love. His example of divineline gift-love quickly souring into diabolical need-love is given by the allegorical figure of Mrs. Fidget, the long-suffering mother and wife who crushes her household with a suffocating and "terrible need to be needed" (52). Lewis describes this failing of gift-love as a failure to let go of affection and as a liability that is almost "congenital to the maternal instinct." It is not only mothers, however, who are guilty of perverted affection in Lewis. Balancing the example of suffocating affection as perverted gift-love, he draws an example of equally suffocating affection as perverted need-love from the pitiful old father himself in *King Lear*: "It would be absurd to say that Lear is lacking in affection. In so far as affection is need-love he is half-crazy with it. Unless, in his own way, he loved his daughters he would not so desperately desire their love. The most unlovable parent (or child) may be full of such ravenous love. But it works to their own misery and everyone else's" (41).

No doubt Lear rails all the more for affection from his daughters because their mother and his wife, his natural-law affective donor, is gone; in addition, his affective needs have further increased as he leaves the specialized man's world of government and enters the unknown domain of retirement and dependency. The first baffling question of *King Lear*, whence comes his strange demand to his daughters to declare fulsomely and competitively their love for their father, has a plausible answer in the greedy need-love of Lewis exacerbated by the absent mother and wife of Chesterton's first household.

Viewed in the lens of the orthodox twentieth-century popular Christian theology of Chesterton and Lewis, *King Lear* can thus be approached as a tragedy of broken homes, dysfunctional loves, absent mothers, and consequent insanity. These dysfunctional loves, however, are redeemed, we shall see, through purgatorial suffering, sacramental relationships, several orders and examples of natural gift-love, and, finally, by supernatural gift-love, however briefly felt and glimpsed.

The major characters of the play, far from suffering mere chaotic meaningless calamities, all experience redemptive suffering. The first steps in their journeys take place in the primary household, which, in the play as in life, is the family. Affection is out of joint in all four families that appear on stage. Dysfunctional love emerges as a major theme of the play in the first scene when Gloucester's two motherless households are revealed. Gloucester coarsely jokes about the genitals ("smell a fault," 1.1.15) of the mother of his natural son, Edmund, a "whoreson" by adultery, within earshot. This grotesque prelude, alluding to the first in a series of missing mothers, announces an important critique of the household. Although Gloucester claims that his legitimate son is "no dearer" (1.1.19) and that he owes a duty to his illegitimate ("the whoreson must be acknowledged" [1.1.22–23]), the sin of adultery begets the sin of envy, and domestic evil follows upon domestic evil. Gloucester does not shirk his bastard or deny his own culpability, but his sinful action unleashes a compounding series of crimes, as if a rupture in sacramental form disturbs

natural-law relationships. Edmund falsely maligns his half-brother, a gulled Gloucester banishes his honest son, Edmund betrays his own father, and, finally, the good brother takes revenge upon the evil one.

While Shakespeare in no wise dispenses moralistic platitudes, he exposes immediately the disorder of the harm committed by adultery upon the form of the family irrespective of the “sport” of the “making” (1.1.21–22): it weakens the father’s authority and alienates the mother. In the households of Gloucester, as in those throughout the entire play, no mother is present, neither the wife nor the mistress, and so the balance of familial love is wildly out of kilter. The perfect setting for this maternal abandonment, barrenness, and marginality is the bleak, elemental, pagan, Godless, pre-Christian Britain, which itself may be analogous to the England contemporary to Shakespeare where the cult of the Blessed Mother and fidelity to Holy Mother Church could be considered treason.

The traditional Christian holy family of father, mother, and children, united in one bond of assorted loves with father as head, mother as heart, and children as cocreated gifts in blood flowing between them, have been seen by Blessed John Paul II as following the pattern of the Trinity as a *communio personarum*.⁷ The family is the training ground and the proving ground of Christian love: to use Lewis’s categories, need-love, emerging from sacramental eros into balanced *storge*, can ascend toward self-giving agape. In the blended families of Gloucester, however, Venus, the raw sexual instinct devoid of eros (Lewis’s word for “being in loveness”), poisons *storge* and prohibits agape. The loves are disordered and misappropriated. Thus, with such a background, Edmund hates Edgar, and Gloucester too credulously believes a lie about his good son, insensitively jokes about his bad one, and doesn’t know the soul of either. The nurturing mothers of tenderness and intimacy are totally absent, and the loving gaze in this unholy family is totally blinded long before Gloucester’s eyes are gouged out.

No immediate formal cause of the unbalanced *storge* in Lear’s own household emerges, but the parallels are exact and manifold: a foolish

father, jealous siblings, a wronged good child, an absent mother and wife. This out-of-joint family background, not revealed immediately, is essential to understanding Lear's initial question as to which of his daughters loves him most: broken families breed impatient love. In his sudden, autocratic, seemingly spontaneous question of love, Lear demands and thereby undoes love, for gift-love is not gift-love if not freely given, whereas he commands it as a father-king. He needs gift-love, and needy gift-love is impossible to negotiate, for love that fills a need cannot be an overflowing gift but only an insufficient response to an unanswerable requirement. He turns from daughter to daughter voraciously and promiscuously, and even before Cordelia is precise with her answer we know that it will fall short.

In other words, to use Lewis's categories, the essential early problem of Lear is that he (and other characters) confuses need-love with gift-love. Shakespeare introduces the essential paradox of human love with the wisdom of a solitary father (almost all biographers conclude that he was separated from his household in Stratford for long periods as a playwright in London):⁸ love commanded is love denied. Lear demands gift-love from his daughters, but, as daughters about to receive their inheritance, they can offer only affective need-love tainted by the lure of gain. They owe him love as filial obedience; their answer will in turn be rewarded contractually. He sets them, in other words, a self-contradictory task. Whereas Regan and Goneril ("reeking" [2.2.220] and "gonorrhoea" [2.2.411]) play a word contest in their fulsome responses, talking not like modest women but swooning swains or *milites gloriosi*, Cordelia ("heart" in Latin) is serious in her radical understatement. Regan and Goneril make more sense in their blatantly insincere flattery than Cordelia does in her coldly sincere precision. Critics almost never note Cordelia's stinginess and literalness, for they miss what she too misses about love. When Lear asks his "joy" (1.1.82) what she "can say to draw a third more opulent than [her] sisters," (1.1.85–86) she answers "nothing" twice (1.1.87–89), falling absolutely and shockingly short of the "everything" that Lear craves. She loves her "majesty/Accord-

ing to my bond, no more nor less.” She owes love, but she does not give it, and so nothing is precisely what she does give even when she promises half:

Good my lord,
 You have begot me, bred me, loved me. I
 Return those duties back as are right fit,
 Obey you, love you and most honour you.
 Which have my sisters husbands, if they say
 They love you all? Haply when I shall wed,
 That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
 Half my love with him, half my care and duty.
 Sure I shall never marry like my sisters
 To love my father all.
 (1.1.95–104)

Most critics look past the mathematical parsimony of Cordelia’s response: “begot,” “bred,” and “loved” are duties that produce with exactitude, no more, no less; “obey,” “love,” and “honour,” all to be divided exactly in half. Even the asyndeton in “begot me, bred me, loved me” suggests a minimalist appreciation of Lear’s gift-loves through eros and affection. If Goneril and Regan reduce love to a word game, Cordelia reduces it to a zero-sum game. She even misunderstands the sacrament of marriage, which requires infinite, not divisible love: only half of her love will be for her husband. She distorts the meaning of filial bond nearly to mean filial bondage. As Lear wishes for gift-love but can only command need-love, Cordelia sees gift-love as finite, but in fact it is infinite because by nature it reaches out from and to the infinite values of the human person. As St. Thomas Aquinas says, against Abelard and Bernard, love cannot increase by addition, but “by being intensified in its subject.”⁹ As such, “it is a participation of the infinite character which is the Holy Ghost,” and “the cause of the increase of charity, namely God, is possessed of infinite power.”¹⁰ Furthermore, she baldly confuses affection and eros: how can it be wrong to give her father all her filial affection and

her husband all her uxorial eros? In amatory mathematics, eros and affection cannot be added or subtracted to each other, for they belong to different sets. Love is a relation, to use Aristotle's categories, not a quantity. Cordelia cannot fathom how she can love her father more without loving her husband less. This theme of love as accounting is repeated by her sisters in the second act when they bid their father's "need" for "fifty" retainers down to twenty, ten, one, and finally none by the end of act 2. Peter Saccio sees the same misunderstanding of love as a quantity at play between Lear and Cordelia (although he blames this confusion entirely on Lear alone and doesn't see Cordelia also at fault as I do) in Sonnet 87 and claims that this "favorite idea of Shakespeare" has as its source the Parable of the Talents in the Gospel of Matthew. He contrasts the reckless "great gift" of love (line 11) with the prudential and legalistic self-concern of "bonds" (line 4) and points out that these oppositions (Portia's "mercy" versus Shylock's "bond") organize the drama of *The Merchant of Venice*. Saccio calls the infinite generosity of love as understood in the Gospel as part of Shakespeare's most common "mental equipment."¹¹

Surely these misconstrued loves—Lear's self-contradictory demand for gift-love, Regan and Goneril's shallow view of love as rhetorical game, and Cordelia's stingy understanding of love as finite duty—can be explained in part by the lack of the exemplary queen of love, the mother and wife, in their household, by Christian tradition the domestic church, to balance affection and to teach infinite giving. Lear's household, to use Chesterton's categories, is lopsided: arbitrary paternal monomania is not countered by nurturing feminine universal wisdom. Lear knows only to demand love, Cordelia is afraid to speak love, and Goneril and Regan are faithless in love.

In short, need-love is demanded and answered first in the family through the selfish cry of the babe for milk, of the "stealthy" for "lust" (Edmund's words for his illegitimate conception), of the sibling for advantage, of the individual for everything. In healthy families, need-love is demanded and answered, but also given and exceeded. In broken families, again drawing upon Lewis and Chesterton, in particular

where the mother and wife are absent, unsatisfied need-love can become an obsessive futile search, and *Lear* demonstrates this obsession tragically. “All” is never enough (*Lear*), and the little that one has is clinched and held back (*Cordelia*), thrown about meaninglessly (*Goneril* and *Regan*), talked about scoffingly (*Gloucester*), or used for personal gain (*Edmund*).

Indeed, misconstrued, unstable, withheld, jealous, uncertain affection is announced in the very first line of the play by Kent: “I thought the King had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall.” *Lear*’s confused affection for *Regan*’s and *Goneril*’s households is not only a prelude and sign of his affective disorder but also thrusts us into *Cordelia*’s arithmetical language on love. Furthermore, *Lear*’s confusion of the categories of need-love and gift-love and the clear admission that he needs gift-love more than he wants to be given need-love are revealed at the end of the task of publicly declaring their love that he sets his daughters:

Which of you shall we say doth love us most,
That we our largest bounty may extend,
Where nature doth with merit challenge?
(1.1.51–53)

In other words, *Lear* is asking for infinite gift (“love us most,” “largest bounty,” “may extend”) as a reward for finite deserved need (“nature” and “merit”).¹²

Lewis’s understanding of the second natural love, *eros*, helps us to understand the other two primary households. *Eros*, the obsession with one particular man or woman as oneself, may or may not coexist with *Venus*, sexual desire, and it can even be a brief foretaste of charity, the selfless concern for all humanity as oneself: “The event of falling in love is of such a nature that we are right to reject as intolerable the idea that it should be transitory. In one high bound it has overleaped the massive wall of our selfhood; it has made appetite itself altruistic, tossed personal happiness aside as a triviality

and planted the interests of another in the centre of our being. Spontaneously and without effort we have fulfilled the law (toward one person) by loving our neighbour as ourselves" (1114).

It starts out high: "one of the first things Eros does is obliterate the distinction between giving and receiving." Even in the early stages, however, eros can also sink low, for lovers can so desire each other that they sometimes say they want to eat each other. Like affection, eros, "honoured without reservation and obeyed unconditionally, becomes a demon."

King Lear, unlike the romantic comedies and even unlike *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Othello*, has no couple in love and thus no exemplar of divine eros, but Regan and Goneril do exemplify demonic eros. They quarrel, turn against their husbands and each other, and destroy their households for unrequited eros. Eros might at first seem to have no hold on their lover Edmund, for he clearly is not in love with them but is using them for advancement while getting a little Venus on the side, but his usually puzzling repentance at the end of the play and countermanding, too late, of the order to execute Cordelia, has an explanation in the fact that eros has opened him to the vision of Cordelia's beatific personhood through relationship, however mercenary, with her sisters. As he pants for life following Edgar's mortal blow, he acknowledges Goneril's and Regan's erotic love, which started, no doubt, as what Lewis calls "Venus":

EDMUND: Yet Edmund was beloved:
The one the other poisoned for my sake,
And after slew herself.
(5.3.237–39)

It has not been affection, neither filial nor fraternal, that has touched Edmund, led him to relationship, and opened him up to this vision of right action: "some good I mean to do/despite of mine own nature" (5.3.241–42). It is too wicked to imagine that his service to Cornwall, his treacherous betrayal of his own father by giving Cornwall Gloucester-

ter's letter from the invaders from France (which he has even stolen from a "locked closet"), has brought him to relationship, even though Cornwall promises Edmund that, for this action, "thou shalt find me a dear father for thy love" (3.5.24–25). Edmund's "loyalty" (3.5.22) to Cornwall, which is disloyalty to his own father (to whom, of course, he owed nothing by law but something by nature), has stolen the Earldom of Gloucester from his illegitimate family but still his flesh and blood. The only explanation, dramatically hidden like God's grace at work in a great sinner's heart, is that the eros exchanged between him and Goneril or Regan (or both) has somehow brought Edmund's calculating heart closer to God's giving love than has affection.

The Catholic reader should not be so surprised at Edmund's astounding transformation. In Benedict XVI's first encyclical, *God Is Love*, he shows the ultimate unity of eros, or "ascending, possessive, or covetous love" and agape, or "descending, oblation love." Western philosophy has too often made them opposites, he maintains, whereas Sacred Scripture, in the Song of Songs especially, shows that the lover's erotic love of the beloved can be self-giving. He points out that the early Church Fathers allegorized this love poetry as that between God and Israel and Christ for the Church. God's love for his creation has erotic power. As he puts it, "God loves, and his love may certainly be called *eros*, yet it is also totally *agape*" (paragraph 9). He has already explained how eros can become agape:

Yet *eros* and *agape*—ascending love and descending love—can never be completely separated. The more the two, in their different aspects, find a proper unity in the one reality of love, the more the true nature of love in general is realized. Even if *eros* is at first mainly covetous and ascending, a fascination for the great promise of happiness, in drawing near to the other, it is less and less concerned with itself, is concerned more and more with the beloved, bestows itself and wants "to be there for" the other. The element of *agape* thus enters into this love, for otherwise *eros* is impoverished and even loses its own nature. (7)

Shakespeare goes even further in his own claim about the power of eros to transform the heart. He shows how Edmund can be so touched by eros that he offers a gift of saving love (his intent, not its effect) not to his beloved, for Goneril and Regan are dead, but on behalf of Cordelia, which is one of several acts of “motiveless benignity” in *King Lear*, to twist Coleridge’s famous phrase about Iago. He does so not to seek pardon for his soul nor to curry favor or advancement in the court but because, to Shakespeare’s traditional Christian imagination, God infuses him with grace, with what Lewis calls “supernatural Gift-love.” For Aquinas, such a transformation is possible not as an acquired virtue but only as an infused gift of the Holy Spirit (*ST*, II-II, a. 24, q. 2).

Philia and the Kingdom

The secondary household in *King Lear* is the kingdom, or, to emphasize better that the household is by definition a small unit, the court, which is cross-fertilized with the family households. We see first that Lear’s kingdom is to be divided among his daughters; thus, power moves along family lines. The feudal system of king (Lear), duke (Cornwall and Albany), and earl (Gloucester) is in force; households and thus families are arranged hierarchically within the kingdom. If the primary households of family are ill, therefore, there is little hope that the secondary household of the kingdom will be well.

In her recent book on the hidden Catholic codes in Shakespeare, *Shadowplay*, the British scholar Clare Asquith points out that King James had written just before *King Lear* a treatise, *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies*, arguing that the good kingdom was really a family, with the king a father to his subject children. James’s two sons were in fact named Cornwall and Albany, and to her it is no coincidence that Shakespeare gives them significant roles in *King Lear*. He is not so covertly telling the King, she maintains, that the family kingdom of England, riven in two by the religious conflict, is sick at heart.¹³ When both the primary households and the secondary household

operate on the same model, when your son-in-law is also your sovereign, family bickering can become civil war. Since Cordelia marries France and mounts a rebellion or a restoration, family problems can even lead to international crises.

As eros and affection, the essential loves of the family, are ailing and failing in the primary households, friendship, *philia*, the third human love, is entirely missing in the secondary household, the kingdom. In Lewis's discussion, friendship involves (to use a metaphor that he would certainly allow), a shared creed. Friends, who stand "shoulder to shoulder" rather than "face to face" like lovers and family members, have the same beliefs, the same truths, the same "abouts." As Lewis says, "Friendship must be about something, even if it were only an enthusiasm for dominoes or white mice" (67). It is neither necessary nor natural, he writes, and it arises rationally from a shared interest.

There is no central pair of dramatically significant friends in this sense at the beginning of *King Lear*, like Macbeth and Banquo at the beginning of *Macbeth* (or even Macbeth and Lady Macbeth), Othello and Cassio in *Othello*, or Hamlet and Horatio in *Hamlet*. Kent and Lear and Lear and the Fool are really one-sided affections at the outset. When Kent begins his objections to Lear's treatment of Cordelia in the first scene, friendship is not among the catalogued relationships:

KENT: Royal Lear,
 Whom I have ever honoured as my king,
 Loved as my father, as my master followed,
 As my great patron thought on in my prayers—
 (1.1.140–43)

As king, father, master, and patron, Lear does not possess the same truths as his subject Kent, who disputes his claim that his daughter Cordelia does not love him least (1.1.153). Although the King and the Fool do sometimes laugh together after Lear calls for his amusement in the first act, they are too often at cross-purposes to be

called friends. Both the Fool and Kent see the truth of Lear, but Lear does not see at first the truth of himself or ever of them. The Fool disappears for good without being noticed by Lear, and Lear scarcely understands Kent's self-revelation in act 5. The households of Albany and Cornwall begin not as genuine friends but as territorial allies, and they sap the health of the kingdom as they degenerate into rivals and eventually enemies, with perhaps a remembrance of Old Testament divided houses: "a man's enemies are the men of his own house" (Micah 7:6).

The court is missing in addition what Lewis calls the "matrix" of friendship, which is the shared interest of companions, and companionship is necessary, even if friendship isn't, to the secondary household (63). Unlike *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *Hamlet*, where the companionship of soldiers, fellow soldiers, and actors is often dramatized, companionship is constantly dissolving in *King Lear*. Lear, Kent, and Gloucester are separated in the first scene; Albany and Cornwall become enemies; Edmund forms alliances and abuses relationships. There is no shop talk in *King Lear*. Friendship, as Aristotle noted, is crucial to a well-run polity.¹⁴

The secondary household of the kingdom, therefore, is as ill and mad as the primary households of the family. In this way, the real madness of Lear, the feigned madness of Edgar, and the verbal madness of the Fool, who is said to "have much pined away" for Cordelia since she was banished (1.4.72) have a common explanation in the sickness of the households, both family and kingdom. Lear, confusing need-love and gift-love, fatherhood and kingship, turns his heart inside out and his world upside down; in fact, by banishing his beloved daughter and by mixing power with family affection in his relations with his other two daughters, he is himself one cause of his own madness and ill-treatment. The fugitive Edgar, victimized by his brother and father, sees devils in his disguise as Poor Tom of Bedlam. The Fool, worn out by his own manic puns, vanishes suddenly and without explanation.

This mad and motley trio, however, in their broken humanity,

along with the separated Kent and Gloucester, and then Cordelia and finally Albany and even Edmund, form a salvific (that is, a health-making) community too separated to be called companions and too disjointed to be called friends. They create a small group gathered in Lear's name, something like a church, the third household in the play, and they are united in the fourth love, this one becoming a supernatural one, agape, or charity.

Agape and the Church, the Third Household

The seeds of the fourth love in the third household are sown in the soul of a much-overlooked character in the play, Kent, the banished servant, who, as the "true blank of [Lear's] eye," pays for speaking truth in defense of Cordelia with the cost of exile, which he immediately declares to be not "banishment" but "freedom" because of the foulness and falsity of the first two households of Lear's family and kingdom (1.1.182). He leaves them, he announces, to "shape his old course in a country new" (1.1.188). The "old course" is service in freedom, not in duty or affection, and the "country new" is the third household of charity.

The duty-bond between servant and master has been annulled by Lear's unjust decree of banishment; Kent is free and owes nothing further in the order of justice to his king, father, master, and patron. In that freedom, however, he returns Lear's cruelty with loving service, not contracted obligation, with what Lewis calls supernatural gift-love, bestowed by God himself, related to but far beyond the natural gift-loves that can grow out of affection, friendship, and eros:

But in addition to these natural loves God can bestow a far better gift; or rather, since our minds must divide and pigeon-hole, two gifts.

He communicates to men a share of His own Gift-love. This is different from the Gift-loves He has built into their nature. These never quite seek simply the good of the loved object for the object's own sake. But Divine Gift-love—Love

Himself working in a man—is wholly disinterested and desires what is simply best for the beloved. . . . [It] enables him to love what is not naturally lovable; lepers, criminals, enemies, morons, the sulky, the superior and the sneering. Finally, by a high paradox, God enables men to have a Gift-love towards Himself. . . .

That such a Gift-love comes by Grace and should be called Charity, everyone will agree. (127–29)

Kent and the Drama of Supernatural Gift-Love

Kent, at the moment of his return in service to Lear, is the first character in the play to enter the household of charity. His service is a gift because it has no hope of gain; it can be called supernatural, at least in part, because it springs up at the very moment that Lear has become most ugly and unlovable; it is against self-interest and, in worldly terms, absurd. Kent's description of his identity as a mere naked "man," unclothed in any social categories, indicates the purity of his new relationship with his old master: it does not hope for gain or restoration (at least Kent never mentions these motives); it comes mysteriously (Kent himself has almost no explanation) as the result of an authoritative call. When Lear notices Kent in disguise, their exchange is wrought in religious terms, even the jokes:

LEAR: (to Kent) How now, what art thou?

KENT: A man.

LEAR: What dost thou *profess*? What wouldst thou with us?

KENT: I do *profess* to be no less than I seem; to *serve* him truly that will put me in trust, to *love* him that is honest, to converse with him that is wise and says little, to fear *judgement*, to fight when I cannot choose—and to *eat no fish*.

LEAR: What art thou?

KENT: A very honest-hearted fellow, and as poor as the *King*.

LEAR: If thou be'st as poor for a subject as he's for a king, thou art poor enough. What would's't thou?

KENT: *Service.*

LEAR: Who wouldst thou serve?

KENT: You.

LEAR: Dost thou know me, fellow?

KENT: No, sir; but you have that in your countenance which I would fain call *master*.

LEAR: What's that?

KENT: *Authority.*

(1.4.9–30, emphases mine.)

In other words, Kent professes, in a new country and in a new household, a relationship of naked loving service to the authority of a poor king. The resemblance to the Christian project, to the profession of service to the authority of the poor King of Kings, is unmistakable. It comes upon Kent as “motiveless benignity.” He will serve Lear as Lewis claims the most sincere Christian serves God: because he needs to.

Supernatural gift-love and supernatural need-love, Lewis accepts and Shakespeare dramatizes, come with suffering. In this part of the fairy tale of love, Shakespeare follows Christian tradition in showing how supernatural charity, agape, arrives by way of the cross. Lewis's focus is on the supernatural aspect of charity, its joy and sublimity, but Shakespeare's tragedy develops its natural encounter with pain and death. Charity requires suffering both because the will aches and burns, fusses and fumes, groans and laments, as it puts itself away in devotion to the will of another, and also because the cold world is not governed by reason and goodness, which are Charity's lord and master. Lewis writes, “We shall draw nearer to God, not by trying to avoid the sufferings inherent in all loves, but by accepting them and offering them to Him; throwing away all defensive armour. If our hearts need to be broken, and if He chooses this as the way in which they should break, so be it” (123). Thus, Kent must, so to speak, do time in Charity. It is, of course, comical if not bathetic that he is put in the stocks for offending the fop Oswald, Goneril's steward, who has in turn offended Lear; Kent's charity, seen from below, is revenge in the order of court manners. Seen from above, it is a di-

vine chivalry, a defense of a powerless injured party (who is also an injuring party), a vicarious atonement. The Jacobean audience could have easily seen Kent's hands and legs stretched in the stocks as a miniature comic crucifixion. In the morality plays of the day, the allegorical figure of Charity was often placed in the stocks. While the stocks may have been nothing more than ankle binding (although the Quarto text does say that at least his "legs" are to be "put in"), they do cause pain, and Kent's observation, albeit with some comic hyperbole, alludes to the visionary heights and emotional depths of tragic Christian suffering: "Nothing almost sees miracles/But misery" (2.2.163–64). As he falls asleep, as Gloucester, Edgar, and Lear will all fall asleep later to awaken to subsequent charitable vision, he says, "Fortune, good night; smile once more; turn thy wheel." This allusion to the "wheel of fortune" also recalls Lear's reference to being bound on a "wheel of fire" (4.7.47), which, as we shall see, is quite clearly a purgatorial burning. Kent as comic suffering servant is a precursor of Edgar, banished by Gloucester but still doing his father's business on the heath and on the cliff to Dover. Jan Kott, the Polish critic and one founder of the existentialist-nihilist reading of *Lear* in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, has written expressively of the dumb show, the pantomime discourse, of Gloucester's crawling toward the edge of the abyss and representing by wordless action man's abject and lonely existential state in the play as a whole.¹⁵ Kent in the stocks, on the other hand, also communicates wordlessly by the dumb show of charity in the stocks his salvific sacrificial service to Lear, and it is significant that Kent's speech (in the Quarto) also ends with a mimic gesture: he sleeps. When he wakes, he discovers on stage his lord Lear, who will set him free.

Such availability is necessary to the acceptance of gift-love, but receptivity is not the only requirement. Cooperation with supernatural gift-love, with grace, is another: "There is of course a sense in which no one can give to God anything which is not already His; and if it is already His what have you given? But since it is only too obvious that we can withhold ourselves, our wills and hearts, from God,

we can, in that sense, also give them” (128). Kent, although he sleeps and suffers, also acts: he initiates correspondence with Cordelia, which leads to the great reconciliation of the play between rejected daughter and rejected father, but he acts blindly, as it were, seeking a good that he senses but does not know. Far more important than his role as messenger between divided England and distant France is his constant faithful presence to Lear throughout their banishments, who recognizes him only dimly at the end of the play:

LEAR: This is a dull sight: are you not Kent? . . .

KENT: No, my good lord, I am the very man—

LEAR: I'll see that straight.

(5.3.279, 284–85. Folio)

But he never sees it straight, never sees the fullness of Kent's gift-love. Like the figure of charity in the stocks, Kent must be content to have remained faithful to Lear in adversity without expectation of gratitude, during the worst horrors of Lear's exile on the stormy heath and all-too-brief reconciliation with his daughter, and to have given, as Lear claims that he himself has given to his ungrateful daughters, his all; his release from the stocks is from the bondage of the contemptuous world, not into the full reciprocated gift-love in his beloved's heart. As so often in *Lear*, the Christian shape of Kent's loving service is orthodox but one-sided, frustrated, unrewarded, and almost unnoticed, but the audience notices the “new man” Kent who is “dead and rotten” in Lear's forgotten remembrance.

This drama of unjust exile and separation, of sleepy resignation and impoverished patience, of suffering agency through service and relationship, of reawakening and restoration of surprising mysterious love, includes (and excludes) all of the characters of the play. It is the deepest pattern of the play; it is the play itself. Kent is the comic miniature prototype of this classic Christian mold, parts of which touch even the diabolical Edmund, redeemed by erotic relationship and surprised to goodness after Cordelia's loving return, and Albany

(“white”), who throws over to the cause of good as he becomes aware of his intimacy with the cause of evil.

Edgar and Supernatural Gift-Love

This redemptive pattern fits the Edgar and Gloucester story so perfectly that it is clear that the purpose of the addition of this subplot to the original *King Lear* source was to reinforce and highlight the Kent-Lear and Lear-Cordelia redemptive patterns. Edmund betrays both Edgar and Gloucester and causes their exile. He lies about his brother but merely informs against his father, but both exiles are unjust: Edgar’s because it is founded on a lie, Gloucester’s because he has sided with the just cause in defending Lear against his daughters. Lear’s cause, while it owes much to the King’s own selfishness and rashness, derives its justice from the natural and divine law: fathers are owed basic shelter and obedience by daughters.

Gloucester demonstrates sleepy resignation in his near-death experience at Dover cliffs. In the Quarto, he kneels and falls after he makes this prayer:

GLOUCESTER: O you mighty gods
 This world I do renounce and in your sights
 Shake *patiently* my great affliction.
 (4.6.34–36)

His mock suicide attempt causes him to swoon: Edgar says that “he revives” (4.6.47). His son has staged this event to “cure” his “despair” (4.6.33–34). Gloucester awakes to discover that his “life’s a miracle” (4.6.55). He has been cured and restored to psychic health, and Edgar attributes the victory for his father’s soul to God’s wide possibilities over Satan’s ugly narrowness:

EDGAR: As I stood here below methought his eyes
 Were two full moons. He had a thousand noses,

Horns whelked and waved like the enraged sea.
 It was some fiend. Therefore, thou happy father,
 Think that the clearest gods, who make them honours
 Of men's impossibilities, have preserved thee . . .
 GLOUCESTER: I do remember now. Henceforth, I'll bear
 Affliction till it do cry out itself
 'Enough, enough,' and die. . . .
 EDGAR: Bear free and patient thoughts.
 (4.6.71–80)

Edgar's own impoverished patience endures the ragged disguises of escaped madman and uneducated rustic. He suffers exile longer than anyone in the play, and his pronouncement on patience once again to his "cured" father in the wake of Lear and Cordelia's defeat is oracular:

Men must endure
 Their going hence even as their coming hither.
 Ripeness is all.
 (5.2.9–11)

Neither Edgar's nor Gloucester's patience prevents them from being suffering agents in service and relationship, replacing for each other the missing mothers. Before Edgar has ministered to his father, Gloucester seeks out banished Lear in the storm to offer him warmth despite the decrees of his heartless daughters:

GLOUCESTER: Go in with me. My duty cannot suffer
 T'obey in all your daughters' hard commands.
 Though their injunction be to bar my doors
 And let this tyrannous night take hold upon you,
 Yet have I ventured to come seek you out,
 And bring you where both fire and food is ready.
 (3.4.144–49)

Later in this scene, he shelters them all, Lear, Kent, the fool, and his own son Edgar, whom he does not recognize as Tom of Bedlam,

in a “hovel,” and soothes the raging Lear, who takes Tom for an Athenian philosopher, with tender comfort: “No words, no words, hush” (3.4.177). He informs Kent of the plot to kill Lear, and he offers them provision (3.6.85–94). Gloucester joins the rebellion of Cordelia against the unjust households of Goneril and Regan, which costs him his eyes and earns him the greatest on-stage torture in all of theater.

Thus, Edgar’s own ministrations to the father who has wronged him may be prepared for by his witnessing of his father’s kindness to himself and to his king. Supernatural gift-love begets more supernatural gift-love. Edgar saves his father from despair, leads him by the hand, kills Oswald as the henchman is about to execute his “traitorous” father, and keeps him sane with chastening and soothing words, kindly postponing the revelation of his identity as if he knew that recognition would overcome his frailty. After he kills Oswald to save his father’s life in fact as he has saved it in the dumb show of suicide, he takes Gloucester by the hand to shelter him from the storm of war as his father had sheltered Tom from the storm on the heath: “Come, father, I’ll bestow you with a friend.”

Gloucester ends surprised unto death by restored mysterious love. Edgar tells the tale to Albany, who has earned the right to hear this vision with his own alliance with goodness:

EDGAR: Met I my father with his bleeding rings,
 Their precious stones new lost; became his guide
 Led him, begged for him, saved him from despair . . .
 I asked his blessing and from first to last
 Told him our *pilgrimage*. But his flawed heart,
 Alack, too weak the conflict to support,
 ‘Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief,
 Burst smilingly.
 (5.3.188–98, emphasis mine.)

By asking for Gloucester’s blessing, Edgar is recognizing his role in the prolonged deception for his father’s good and honoring Gloucester’s

suffering service to mad Tom and Lear: Edgar sees Gloucester's love restored to him as Gloucester sees Edgar's restored to him "feelingly."

Charity even touches the Edgar-Edmund relationship. Confronted with Albany's accusations of treason, Edmund eventually confesses his iniquity to him and "forgives" Edgar, who, as he is still a stranger, receives an ironic gesture of gift-love that is also consistent with divine retribution:

If thou'rt noble,
I do forgive thee.
EDGAR: Let's exchange charity:
I am no less in blood than thou art, Edmund;
If more, the more thou'st wronged me.
My name is Edgar and thy father's son.
The gods are just and of our pleasant vices
Make instruments to plague us:
The dark and vicious place where thee he got
Cost him his eyes.
EDMUND: Thou'st spoken right, 'tis true;
The wheel is come full circle, I am here.
(5.3.161-72)

The wheel of fortune, which Lear will later identify as the "wheel of fire" of Purgatory, has brought Edmund, even Edmund, not only to the low place of worldly suffering but also to its correlated summit of forgiveness and grace.

Cordelia and Supernatural Gift-Love

This biblical pattern of suffering in exile and restoration of love through beatific action in relationship reaches its zenith in the Cordelia-Lear plot. It is impossible to isolate this plot or even this relationship from the Edgar-Gloucester plot and relationship because they are not only parallel but also intersecting. Those intersections are in fact part of the dramatic truth of this play: persons are so

bound to one another that individual isolated action—like Edmund’s, Goneril’s, and Regan’s—not only harms the community but even destroys the self.

As we have seen, Lear and Cordelia misunderstand one another and the nature of love at the beginning of the play. He demands gift-love from her when it cannot be demanded; she confuses need-love with closely audited duty. His immediately angry banishment mysteriously liberates Cordelia into the realm of gift-love. It frees her, like Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, to be chosen by the suitor who can love her purely for her self and not for her estate. France understands the metaphysical requirement of gift-love to be free when he says to his rival Burgundy:

Love’s not love
When it is mingled with regards that stands
Aloof from th’entire point.

(1.1.240–43)

Cordelia’s parting words to her father misses that she has entered, not left, the realm of grace: “But yet, alas, stood I within his [i.e., Lear’s] grace, I would prefer him to a better place.” Like Kent and Edgar freed of duty-bound affection, Cordelia travels to a “country new.”

We never see her in that land of grace, where a scuttled arranged marriage blooms into gift-love matrimony, but her long absence, though not dramatized, is dramatically significant as yet another example of sleepy resignation and impoverished patience, for she has accepted without complaint the loss of a third of Lear’s kingdom. The rhetorical transformation from the amatory parsimony of “Nothing more, nothing less” to the hyperbolic generosity of “all” is obvious in her greeting, upon returning to England, to that other gift-lover:

CORDELIA: O thou good Kent, how shall I live and work
To match thy goodness? My life will be too short,
And every measure fail me.

(4.7.1–3)

She speaks the very language of abundant gift-love that she had explicitly refused to speak in the household of Lear. She is so transformed that her father takes her first for a “soul in bliss” and asks where she did “die” (4.7.46, 49). Her expansive language is obvious when she responds to his glimpse of her real identity as Cordelia with the extrametrical “I am, I am,” in which Fr. Peter Milward recognizes an allusion to God’s self-identification to Moses in the burning bush of Genesis 3:14.¹⁶ Later, when he acknowledges his injustice to her, she denies it again with repetition: “No cause, no cause” (4.7.70, 75).

The household of supernatural gift-love is a land of blessing and forgiveness. Like Edgar and Gloucester, Cordelia and Lear perform a dumb show of prayer:

CORDELIA: [*Kneels*] O look upon me, sir,
 And hold your hands in benediction o’er me!
 [*She restrains him as he tries to kneel.*]
 No, sir, you must not kneel.
 (4.7.57–59)

Her new humility ends with Lear’s confession: “You must bear with me. Pray you now, forget and forgive; I am old and foolish” (4.7.83–84). She herself has begged the gods for help: “O you kind gods! Cure this great breach in his abused nature” (4.7.15).

Supernatural gift-love arrives out of the blue and wakes us into a new life. Cordelia comes upon Lear, from far away and unannounced, to suffer in service to Lear, whom she calls her “sir,” her “highness,” and her “royal lord” (4.7. *passim*, 44, 83). Supernatural gift-love is a blind surprise; Cordelia’s unexpected unmerited arrival is like Lear’s appearance to Kent waking up in the stocks, like the Fool and Kent’s discovery of Edgar asleep on the hay of the hovel, like Gloucester’s *trouvaillie* of his own life at Dover Cliff. Like Kent, Cordelia is serving the King, not as a pledged military vassal, but as a minister in the free land of grace, coming from France, the nation that, in Shakespeare’s day, still permitted the cult of the Blessed Mother, like a St. Joan in

the third household of gift-love. To be sure, Cordelia has come also to fight a rebellion against an evil empire, but this action is downplayed and left to the leadership at the end of the scene to Kent. Cordelia's chief purpose is to save her father, not his kingdom, to be a servant in the third household, not a warrior in the second. The absent mother of the first household, the salvific woman, has finally made her appearance. Her suffering service exacts from her the highest cost, her life by hanging as a captured rebel, the crucifixion of supernatural gift-love. When Lear called her a "soul in bliss," he was seeing the second highest truth of the play. She becomes the sacrificed Christ for him.

When she arrives back in England, she acknowledges in a petition to a still absent Lear the supernatural aspect of her loving service in what the Arden Shakespeare editor R. A. Foakes calls the "most direct Christian reference" in the play (to Luke 2:49, where Jesus, found at the Temple, says, "I must go about my Father's business."):

. . . O dear father,
 It is thy business that I go about . . .
 No blown ambition doth her arms incite,
 But love, dear love, and our aged father's right.
 (4.4.23–27)¹⁷

The emphasis is on love, which does not contradict right but surpasses it, a love that she connects to the Father of Creation, and the word's repetition shows once again how Cordelia has moved from amatory parsimony to amatory expansiveness. She has learned that love cannot be added or subtracted but only intensified. Moreover, she reveals that her earlier fear of conflict between duty to father and duty to husband was baseless; "great France" has been won over through compassion, not justice, by the tale of Lear's beggarly need, and love, dear love, does not acknowledge territorial boundaries.

Lear and the Domestic Church

For the most profound truth of the play, it is necessary to trace out the aforementioned redemptive pattern in Lear himself. Unjust exile comes from his “pelican daughters,” and it thrusts Lear from the autocratic powerfulness of treating his kingdom like his purse to the utter powerlessness of seeking a roof in a storm. He learns the hard lesson of creaturely dependency. The tragic paradox of Lear is the paradox of supernatural gift-love that stuns Lewis at the beginning of his study: “Man approaches God most nearly when he is in one sense least like God. For what can be more unlike than fullness and need, sovereignty and humility, righteousness and penitence, limitless power and a cry for help?” (4). Lear’s purgatorial suffering, the “wheel of fire” to which he alludes when he awakens to Cordelia in act 4, brings him to momentary faith. He is the only character in the play to see God, not gods, in pre-Christian England (5.3.17). This beatific vision, like Kent’s waking to Lear, like Gloucester’s reviving to Edgar, like Cordelia’s restoration to Lear, comes about through the familiar pattern of impoverished patience and suffering service.

In exile, the household of grace, all is given, nothing commanded. For all his ranting and raving, Lear also recognizes the need for patience when his daughters have denied him all his retainers:

Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wears’t,
Which scarcely keeps thee warm. But for true need—
You heavens, give me that patience, patience I need.
(2.2.458–60)

Lear’s patience, to be sure, runs hot and cold and in fits and starts, and it is achieved only temporarily and not until his drugged sleep in act 4, but it also begins only at the onset of his impoverishment, where he recognizes the nakedness and poverty of others whom he has never seen. This sympathetic act of supernatural gift-love, a solidarity with the invisible marginal poor of his kingdom, requires more imagination than that needed by Kent, Edgar, Gloucester,

and Cordelia, for their gift-love began as affection for family and friendship with familiars. For the first time in his life, Lear, searching for shelter on the heath with Kent and the Fool, yields to another, gives preferment, puts himself last. Once again, we observe an expressive dumb show:

KENT: Good my lord, enter here.

LEAR: Prithee go in thyself, seek thine own ease. . . .

[*to the Fool*] In boy, go first. You houseless poverty—
Nay, get thee in. I'll pray, and then I'll sleep. *Exit* [*Fool*]

[*Kneels.*] Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
Too little care of this. Take physic, pomp,
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
And show the heavens more just.

(3.4.23–36)

On his knees in prayer, in the posture of radical impoverished patience, Lear imagines a naked wretch like Edgar even before he is discovered hidden in the straw inside a few lines later. Lear's gesture of preferment to the Fool and Kent is a tiny but significant pantomimed act of supernatural gift-love, forming with the other meaningful gestures of generosity a quasi-liturgical discourse, and, later in the scene, he unbuttons his "lendings" to give them to Edgar's "uncovered body" (3.4.99–107), like a St. Francis stripping to give his clothes to a beggar in Assisi.¹⁸ As Lewis writes, "And as all Christians know there is another way of giving to God; every stranger whom we feed or clothe is Christ" (129). Lear discovers the corporal works of mercy of Christian tradition, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and the imprisoned, all collapsed into the needy Tom of Bedlam.

There on the stormy heath, *King Lear* achieves a partial theodicy in simple gestures of corporal mercy. As Edgar answers Gloucester's famous condemnation of divine injustice, "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods/They kill us for their sport," with "the gods are just" through the miracle of his father's life and the cure of despair, so Lear turns the thunderous language of God in Job's whirlwind back against the universe: "Blow winds and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!" (3.2.1ff). A few lines later, Lear calls himself the "slave" of these elements (3.2.19). Foakes takes "all-shaking thunder" as a specific allusion to Elihu's God, who "thundereth marvelously with his voice" (Job 37:5),¹⁹ but the general point is that Lear is challenging divinity with its own majestic voice. Nihilistic critics miss the story of grace, the story of the third household of supernatural Gift-love, the Church, as the answer to the moral evil of the play. The moral evil, which is the result of human cruelty, and the natural evil, the misery caused by the storm, are temporarily answered and cared for by the charity of this third household that forms in the hovel on the heath: Kent leads Lear, Lear pushes the door open for the Fool and Kent and tears off his clothes for Edgar, Gloucester finds them all and leads them to another outbuilding with a torch. The late Frank Kermode recognized this attempt at a Job-like theodicy but failed to see its success: "The Book of Job, which was so obviously in the playwright's mind, ends with Job's patience rewarded and his goods restored; Lear has no such restoration."²⁰

In fact, all these five homeless men in the storm on the heath—mad Lear, his servant Kent, father Gloucester, banished Edgar, the pining Fool (who also, in loving Lear against his own worldly wisdom, is perhaps a "fool for Christ,")—are hurt and suffering, stripped of social and even natural bonds, related only in freedom and dependency. But in the absence of women, they mother each other by keeping house and seeking shelter and clothing in their nakedness. They are unaware of their godliness; they are doing domestic work *faute de mieux*. They form the slightest and the highest of households, not merely the Holy Christian Family but even the Body of Christ,

the Church. While the women may not save the second household of the kingdom, the men save one another in the third household of the Church. As the mother has been missing in the home and friendship in the kingdom, cult, perhaps even the Roman rite banished since Elizabeth's England, has been missing from Christian worship. The first household of the family is dysfunctional; the second of the kingdom, in rebellion; the third of the Church, in exile.

Theirs is the tiny but universal household, united freely in the authority of the king, which grows until it includes Edgar saving Gloucester from despair; Albany seceding from the evil empire that does not grow but diminishes; and even Edmund countermanding his execution of Lear and Cordelia. The third household, the household of grace, is a mustard seed of a hovel: it is a tiny web of persons, of Needers and Givers, who minister and relate to one another, like a band of Jesuit *companeros*, not fellow Club members (for nothing but necessity and gift binds them together), in such complex ways that they make the Trinity seem almost simple: they all serve each other reciprocally, these broken men nursing one another in neediness as proxies for the absent mothers, Kent and Lear, Edgar and Gloucester, Lear and Cordelia; fathers become the children of their children, the children become the parents to their parents (to borrow Edgar's phrase, the fathers child as the children father); the king becomes the servant to his servant, a woman becomes both mother and Christ to her childish God the father, a servant becomes Christ to his king, and so on. This group forms, in short, a *communio personarum* united in the authority of the suffering king (and so cannot degenerate into an anarchy of divisive individualism), a unity in radical freedom without the duty-bonds of the first and second households, family and kingdom or court, which lifts characters up from sinful willfulness to living for others through others. It is a kind of church where two or three are gathered freely in the name of the Lord. The remains of this *communio* form the kingdom household that saddened Edgar inherits and must bring together at the end of the play with reluctant Kent and willing Albany, the evil empire of Goneril, Regan, Cornwall, Oswald, and

Edmund having poisoned itself to ruins. It is the kingdom of love, the end of which is what Aquinas called the *communicatio beatitudinis aeternae* (“the fellowship of everlasting happiness,” *ST*, II-II, a. 23, q. 5).

This *communio* is not just a good-works society or a charitable brotherhood. In its grandest expression, in the reunification of Lear and Cordelia, the transformed expatriates (one returning from abroad, the other from a heath teeming with hellish devils) are brought before its transcendent dimension. Lear’s unjust exile, his prayerful encounter with dependency, his purgatorial service, has awakened him first to the vision of Cordelia as his restored beloved, to which he has been reborn. We witness yet another dumb show as Cordelia comes back to Lear carried in a chair and wrapped in “fresh garments” (4.7.21–22).

Lear, drugged in a hospital litter of dependency that is his new throne, is restored to the true royalty of the true King: supernatural gift-love of one person for another, a love that can only be given and received, not commanded and delivered. These fresh garments are the white shroud of the baptism of desire, perhaps befitting Paul’s “newness of life” and “new man” of the baptized believer, and Lear has died and now sees Beatrice in heaven from Purgatory:

You do me wrong to take me out o’the grave.
 Thou art a soul in bliss, but I am bound
 Upon a wheel of fire that mine own tears
 Do scald like molten lead.
 (4.7.45–48)

Not only does Lear awake to the supernatural gift-love of another person but also to the highest love in Lewis’s scheme, “supernatural Appreciative love toward God himself.” He alone sees it. The Fool, pining away for Cordelia in his natural love and limiting Lear’s vision to the evil of others with his worldly wisdom, does not see it and himself disappears into unmentioned nothingness as Lear begins to see need and good in others, and Cordelia, the Fool’s successor, does not express it.

As captives to his wicked daughters, Lear counsels Cordelia to eschew the world and serve God:

No, no, no, no. Come, let's away to prison;
 We two alone will sing like birds i'the cage.
 When thou dost ask me *blessing* I'll *kneel* down
 And ask of thee *forgiveness*. So we'll live
 And *pray*, and *sing*, and *tell old tales*, and laugh
 At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
 Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too—
 Who loses and who wins, who's in, who's out—
 And take upon's *the mystery of things*
As if we were God's spies. And we'll wear out
 In a walled prison packs and *sects* of great ones
 That ebb and flow by the moon.
 (5.3.8–19, emphases mine.)

This expression of adoration includes the only possible use of the monotheistic singular of divinity in the entire play (in Folio), and the speech is rich with the religious suggestions marked in italics. Lear has reached the highest happiness, the contemplation of God, and as “God’s spies” Lear imagines that he and Cordelia are doing time in Charity like captured Jesuits, telling the old tales of the old faith in a walled prison, sure that their work will outlast the sects of Protestant England.

Notice, too, particularly in this passage, that Lear sees himself and Cordelia as lovebirds. Agape, as Benedict tells us about God’s love, is also eros. The exchanges generally between Lear and Cordelia and Edgar and Gloucester are marked by tactile tenderness. The Fool pines away for Cordelia as a lover separated from his beloved. Actors in stage productions inevitably (even when they seek to follow the Peter Brooks’s radically stripped down nihilistic interpretations) become quite affectionate and touchy in these roles, sometimes overreaching the mark in incestuous fondling. Agape is not a cold, insensate, exclusively spiritual state.

Alas, as Lewis writes, this “supernatural Appreciative love” is barely glimpsed on this earth. Like the two travelers on the road to Emmaus who discover the risen Christ in the stranger to whom they have offered hospitality in the breaking of the bread only to watch him immediately vanish (Lk 24:31), Cordelia and Lear lose their gift-love right after they discover it. As soon as Lear sketches this vision, Edmund arrives and orders them away under guard, and Lear underlines that the cross will be part of blessed togetherness: “Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia, / The gods themselves throw incense.” He returns to the polytheistic plural and embraces her. When we see them touch again, he will be holding her executed body. “Howl, howl, howl, howl! . . . She’s dead as earth” (5.3.255, 257). Kent asks, “Is this the promised end?” (5.3.262). For Lear, without his beloved, the apocalyptic end of the world is indeed at hand (and he has just seen Cordelia in glory), and the triumph of Edgar’s good household over the evil empire is trumpeted sporadically on the play’s battlefield as Armageddon, but the universal judgment and resurrection of the dead seem far away: “O thou’lt come no more/ Never, never, never, never, never.” The iamb in this line of blank verse is reversed, in imitation of Cordelia’s unsprung life, into a trochee with shortened unstressed syllables. All we hear is the negative.

Shakespeare, however, leaves us suspended between death and resurrection, which suspension in turn invokes or challenges our freedom, our ability for gift-love, by withholding conviction and undercutting certainty. Lear recovers from the negativism for one last vision, often held to be a delusion: “Do you see this? Look on her: look, her lips, / Look there, look there!” (5.3.8–9, Folio). And then he dies.

Lewis terminates his description of “supernatural Appreciative love of God” with hardly more confidence: “If we describe what we have imagined we may make others, and make ourselves, believe that we have really been there. And if I have only imagined it, is it a further delusion that even the imagining has at some moments made all other objects of desire—yes, even peace, to have no more fears—

look like broken toys and faded flowers? Perhaps? Perhaps, for many of us, all experience merely defines, so to speak, the shape of that gap where our love of God ought to be. It is not enough. It is something" (140). Shakespeare agrees. It is not enough. It is something. Not nothing, but something. Something has come of nothing.

Shakespeare and Traditional Catholic Belief

God is present, achieves the earthly justice of love, through his loving people acting in his manner if not in his name. And yet Edgar's unrewarded ministrations to his blinded father, Kent's unrewarded service to Lear, Lear's unrewarded corporal acts of mercy to the least of his brothers, Cordelia's unrewarded expressions of sacrificial love, Edmund's unrewarded repentance—these have no other explanation than as acts of divine grace, a view of life that Shakespeare could have come to only as a formed traditional Christian. That this love is best described as Christian gift-love rather than as simple human sympathy, however, does not fix Shakespeare's religious belief so much as reveal his dramatic thought in traditional Christian pattern, which I would call loosely Catholic. First performed during the Christmas season, it is Catholic drama, not merely Catholic code. In places, it stands against Protestant theology: for example, above all, against the key notion of the "total depravity" of human nature. This redemptive structure presents systematic theology in the horizon not of believers but rather of practitioners of Christianity, in a hostile climate burned down to a few shining bones of faith; they make for a postmodern Christian apologetics. Writing both of *Lear* in particular and of Shakespeare's late work in general, the Benedictine critic Paul Murphy writes, "The aim of Shakespeare is not to assert a temporal survival after death. His mysterious task, rather, is to reveal that a love which was real once but now seems lost or dead, cannot in fact be dead. Somehow, even in the face of death and failure, love survives."²¹ This dramatic thinking, however, while it does not profess a creed, confirms an inclination, a flavor, and a hope.

That is, the play could easily have gone another way: Edmund might have defeated Edgar; all the good characters might have died rather than simply most of them; some of the evil characters might have survived. Imagine the effect of a simple reversal in Lear's last moments, of the "Never, never, never, never, never" as his dying words rather than "Look there!" (That "Look there" occurs only in Folio does not mean that it was a pietistic interpolation or a late-in-life change of heart: the entire play's manifold movements of love give Lear and loving witnesses on stage and in the audience the right to imagine a resurrected Cordelia, a Cordelia that we and Lear can see as glorious, not as a delusion but as a prepared-for surprise. Cordelia's return from France has resurrected hope, and her spirit carries the day and lives on in Kent, Albany, Edgar, and some of us.) Imagine patience as not merely temporary and sporadic, as it is in Lear, but as cold calculation, as it is in Goneril. Imagine no third household of freely loving relatedness at all. Imagine no sacrificial service but only self-serving individualism. With whom would you rather align yourself, Cordelia, or Goneril and Regan? The play's answer is clear: even though all three daughters end up dead, the qualities of their lives and journeys are not equal. As Maynard Mack writes, "We know it is a greater thing to suffer than to lack the feelings and virtues that make it possible to suffer. Cordelia, we may choose to say, accomplished nothing, yet we know it is better to have been Cordelia than her sisters."²²

Looking for grace in *Lear* is a daunting task. Even the late Anglican popular theologian and literary critic Helen Gardner surprisingly finds *Lear* inimical to Christian dogma.

[Shakespeare] makes it quite clear that whatever the time of the play the world he presents is not a Christian world. There is no single direct Christian reference throughout. . . . We are in a world in which men seek to understand their fate without any revelation from heaven to be accepted or rejected. The prayers and curses of Lear, the despair of Gloucester, the

piety of Edgar, the morality of Albany, the skepticism of the loyal Kent, the supreme virtue of Cordelia—all these exist in a world outside Christendom. This deliberate withdrawal of the play from the world of Christian thought in which Shakespeare and his audience lived is very striking and gives *King Lear* a quality all its own.²³

“A world outside Christendom”—there’s the rub, and there’s the postmodern attraction to the play, although Gardner goes too far in claiming “no single direct Christian reference” and a “withdrawal from the world of Christian thought.” The households of the family and the court-kingdom, of dysfunctional affection, eros, and friendship, are not ruled by the Gospel values of the third household of supernatural gift-love; the first two households, outside Christendom, are indeed hostile to the third household, the Gospel *communio personarum*. Shakespeare depicts a situation where the Church and the State are not coextensive, which was the situation absolutely in early Rome, beginning to emerge again in Jacobean England, and nearly complete again in the modern West. In this world, supernatural gift-love must speak and act for itself, for the glory of a *deus absconditus*, for the beauty of the generous heart alone. No picture of a reward in an afterlife, much adversity in this life. *Lear* imagines Christian love in a silent vacuum, which is the only environment in which pure gift-love may exist—otherwise, gift-love becomes a payoff to a bribing beloved.

Miracles or providential interventions, if demanded, can obstruct the moral freedom required by love. Generosity can abound more fully under the angst of uncertainty. Thus, the dramatic necessity of free characters and ancient spiritual truth coincide in an amalgam quite satisfactory to contemporary taste, provided that this taste remain open to supernatural possibility. It may be that Shakespeare was answering this question: Can human beings who have lost the certainty of God’s existence still manage to offer themselves compensatory divinely loving acts in the service of a hidden transcendent value?

Edgar Schell asserts that Shakespeare inherited a theological world in which the clarity of providence of Aquinas's God had been replaced by the *deus absconditus* of Calvin. For Schell, as for so many critics, Montaigne is Shakespeare's scripture, not sacred scripture itself or sacred tradition.²⁴ For William R. Elton, Lear lives and dies, like all the characters, a pagan in a pre-Christian world dominated by *deus absconditus*, in his analysis, more *absens* than *absconditus*.²⁵ In my view, however, Shakespeare peoples this cold naturalistic Protestant landscape with generous Catholic supernatural love that triumphs over a bleak existential masterpiece with a rich allegory of love for our time. It is this love that finally shows "the heavens more just." This Catholic Christian interpretation of the play, with an emphasis on the horizontal dimension of faith action in the silence of a vertical faith belief, may be one we have finally caught up to—a vertical faith that can never again be taken for granted. Now that the Cold War is over, it will be interesting to see if *Lear's* triumphant reputation holds—and it will be even more fascinating to see if a new kind of redemptive reading emerges.

Notes

1. R. A. Foakes, "Hamlet" versus "Lear" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), reprinted in *King Lear: Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Grace Ioppolo (New York and London: Norton, 2008), 240–43.
2. Joseph Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997 [1986]), 218.
3. G. K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong With the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994 [1910]), 175.
4. Kathleen McLuskie, "The Patriarchal Bard: Feminist Criticism and *King Lear*," reprinted in *Political Shakespeare*, ed. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1985), 88–108.
5. All citations to *Lear* refer to *The Arden King Lear, Third Series*, ed. R. A. Foakes (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 2001 [1997]). Like almost all editions, this is a composite or conflated edition that uses both the Quarto and the Folio editions of *Lear*. If a text or word occurs only in the Quartos (of which the second was largely reprinted from the first) or only in Folio, I will acknowledge it.
6. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1960), 31–32.

7. Blessed John Paul II, Wednesday General Audience, November 14, 1979.
8. David Bevington observes a preoccupation with father-daughter relationships in the plays especially from *Lear* on. David Bevington, *Shakespeare* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 189.
9. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, a. 24, q. 5.
10. *Ibid.*, a. 24, q. 7.
11. Peter Saccio, "Love in Shakespeare's Sonnets," Lecture 4 of *Shakespeare: The Word and the Action* (Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company).
12. It is possible that Shakespeare uses the loaded word "merit" with an awareness of the controversy between Reform and Tridentine theologians. See David N. Beauregard, *Catholic Theology in Shakespeare's Plays* (Cranbury, NJ: Rosemont Publishing, 2008), 40–56.
13. Claire Asquith, *Shadowplay* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005), 203–05.
14. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1159b–1060a.
15. Jan Kott, "King Lear, or Endgame," *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* reprinted in *Shakespeare: King Lear*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Macmillan, 1969 [1964]), 270–92.
16. Peter Milward, "The Catholic King Lear," *The Catholic Shakespeare?*, Portsmouth Institute Conference, June 11, 2011, <http://www.portsmouthinstitute.org/>.
17. Foakes, *Arden Lear*, 323.
18. Joseph Pearce, *Through Shakespeare's Eyes: The Catholic Presence in Shakespeare's Plays* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 175.
19. Foakes, *Arden Lear*, 263.
20. Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 199–200.
21. Paul Murphy, "God's Spy: Shakespeare and Religious Vision," *Communio* 27, no. 4 (2000): 777.
22. Maynard Mack, *King Lear in Our Time* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1965), 117.
23. Helen Gardner, *King Lear*, 1967, reprinted in *King Lear: Critical Essays*, ed. Kenneth Muir (New York and London, Garland Publishing, 1984), 256–57.
24. Edgar Schell, "The Skeptical Traveler: King Lear and the End of the Pilgrimage," *Strangers and Pilgrims: From The Castle of Perseverance to King Lear* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 188–95.
25. William R. Elton, *King Lear and the Gods* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1966), 338.