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Some Good, Perchance: Shakespeare’s Failures

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In the initial moments during which the remaining catastrophes of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* take their inalterable, inevitable form, and in a rare instance of quietness, one of the play’s greatest ironies (if it is even possible to number or rank them) occurs when Edmund responds to the depiction by Edgar, his brother, of their father’s injuries to his body and spirit: “This speech of yours hath mov’d me,” Edmund says, “And shall perchance do good” (V.iii.200-201).

Edmund – wounded moments before in the swordfight with Edgar – has fallen onstage, in a physical position not unlike that of his father, Gloucester, who fell onto the hard stage (or seemed to) in his leap from the cliff of Dover. The wounded, dying Edmund is “mov’d” by Edgar’s “brief tale” of this history: a tale that Edgar hopes will, when it is told, bring about his own (Edgar’s) death: “And when ‘tis told,” he proclaims, “O that my heart would burst” (V.iii.183).

In his madman’s “habit,” Edgar recalls,

Met I my father with his bleeding rings,

Their precious stones now lost; became his guide,

Led him, begg’d for him, sav’d him from despair;

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1 All references to *King Lear* (and other Shakespeare plays) are to *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974).
Never (O fault!) reveal’d myself unto him,

Until some half hour past . . . (V.iii.190-197)

The re-telling of their shared history “moves” Gloucester to an extremity of bodily and spiritual states – an unendurable extremity, as his “flaw’d heart / (Alack, too weak the conflict to support!),” Edgar says, “‘Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief,/ Burst smilingly” (V.iii.197-199). A happy death, in the Christian tradition, it would seem: a violent, internal “bursting” of the heart that leaves the outward mark of a smile; Edgar desires such a “bursting” for himself. (Kent’s own later outburst [if it is Kent’s] – “Break, heart; I prithee break” – at the sight of the dying Lear in the play’s last moments brings this motif full circle.)

At this description of a bodily paradox – pleasurable self-violence (the smiling death) – Edmund reports a double aftershock upon his own body (he is “mov’d”) and within his own spirit (his spirit is “mov’d” to choose and do good): “This speech of yours hath mov’d me, / And shall perchance do good” (V.iii.200-201). The “brief tale,” however, was not intended for Edmund to hear, or necessarily to affect – Edgar recounts it in response to Albany’s questions: “Where have you hid yourself?” Albany asks; and “How have you known the miseries of your father?” (V.iii.180-181). (The first question is a kind of answer to the second one.)

Edmund – physically unable to move, or prevented from moving (tossed down by Fortune’s wheel, he says) – is thus “mov’d” by a tale for which he is not the intended
audience. The intended effects of the tale (Aristotelian terror and pity, if not exactly Aristotelian catharsis, felt for Gloucester’s troubled life and smiling death: it is questionable whether or not we can speak of Edmund experiencing a catharsis, as he seems to lack the emotions that are usually said to be “purged” through catharsis – more on this problem momentarily), then, include the one character, apart from Lear himself, who most needs instruction (or compulsory education) in the ways that mimesis can nurture the virtues of empathy and even, perhaps, incite moral action, if one is so moved.

In this almost minor incident, easily overshadowed by fast-moving events onstage (later, when Edmund’s death is reported, Albany calls it a “trifle” that cannot be attended to in the presence of greater sorrows), the vast energies of the play are focused, like a Shakespearean Big Bang, to inseminate within the unfeeling, cruel Edmund – through the workings of “(per)chance” – the capacity to be moved toward goodness by hearing of the good that comes from his father’s suffering, repentance, and (happy?) death. Here, an almost unprecedented concentration of Shakespearean dramatic energy is expended at the risk of (cathartic) unpredictability and even, perchance, of failure – Edmund may have responded differently, but the risk, rather, is that the catharsis Edmund experiences (if it is a catharsis) will not achieve any (visibly) good result.

The specific failure in this part of King Lear, of course, lies in the ongoing belatedness (as Stanley Cavell has so well identified it\(^2\)) that marks the “movement” of the entire play: once Edmund is “mov’d” – but before he acts to do “some good” – he

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tells Edgar to “speak you on, / You look as you had something more to say” (V.iii.201-202). Edgar, obeying the needs of the narrative, or Edmund’s new-found need to hear stories of virtuous suffering, “speaks on.” The resumed brief tale that he relates – of Kent’s finding Edgar and Gloucester, and of Kent’s throwing himself on Gloucester to tell the piteous tale of Lear to an ear that, we presume, can no longer hear the tale; and of Kent’s collapse at the end of his tale (“which in recounting, / His grief grew puissant and the strings of life / Began to crack” [V.iii.216-218]) – the “speaking on” required by these stories prevents the prevention of the death of Cordelia (that, and the interruption caused by the entrance onstage of the dead bodies of Goneril and Regan).

Thus the retellings of the fate of Gloucester and Lear, so necessary for Edmund’s metamorphosis, are told at the same time as Cordelia’s death occurs (placing the audience, as many have noted, in its most difficult position in the play: Lear, in Stephen Booth’s words, as “the audience’s greatest achievement” – for the act of surviving its performance); the retellings may, in fact, take up enough time to allow (or create a narrative space for) death. “I pant for life,” Edmund says, stopping the confused action onstage:

Some good I mean to do,

Despite of mine own nature. Quickly send

(Be brief in it) to th’castle, for my writ

Is on the life of Lear and Cordelia.

Nay, send in time. (V.iii.243-248)
In the time it takes for Edmund to learn how not to be violent through compassion and remorse for the sufferings he has inflicted, he fails (or, more charitably, forgets) to act, to “send in time,” and in so failing, his violence lingers, executes autonomously the will to perform, and so acts on its own in his behalf. But at least Edmund has not failed to learn empathy from tragic suffering: some good, indeed.

There are other such failures of this kind in Shakespearean drama, such belated comprehension of the connection between hearing of others’ suffering and doing something good to prevent or, at least, ease it. Leontes in *The Winter’s Tale*, refusing to believe Hermione’s declarations of innocence, bears down upon his queen until, hearing the news of her son’s death, and no longer able to endure such trials, she collapses at his feet, seemingly dead: “Look down,” her faithful servant Paulina commands Leontes, “And see what death is doing” (III.ii.143-144). Only then does Leontes acknowledge his error(s); only a masterly artistic illusion, many years later, will fully “purge” him of his violent tendencies.

And, hauntingly, in *The Tempest*, Prospero’s infliction of false visions upon his enemies works its magic upon all – except the figure most in need of rehabilitation: Prospero’s own brother, Antonio. “For you, most wicked sir,” Prospero tells him, rather mockingly, as the play ends, “whom to call brother / Would even infect my mouth, I do forgive / Thy rankest fault – all of them . . .” (V.i.130-133). Prospero’s performance of forgiveness is answered with unrepentant silence (though perhaps Antonio does not
repent because he is simply too understandably preoccupied with the marketability of a certain fish).

But *King Lear* is more troubling: the failure, deadlier in its consequences. The unendurable, interminable agonies of *Lear* seem to mock our apologies for the “terrible beauty” born of the representation of so much suffering. The Johnsonian *profugio* – the averting of the eyes from the sight of the dead Cordelia – justly governs our disquiet admiration: in the end, what is the nature of the play’s aesthetic? Does the play – do we? – recover from its violence? Given the violence of our own times, Jonas Barish notes, “one of the things about the Elizabethtans and Jacobeans that make us feel close to them is their own fascination with violence”\(^3\) (101). “In both epochs,” he adds, there is a “fixation” on violence, “extending not only to violence itself but also to the representation of violence” (101).

Francis Barker argues\(^4\) that in *Lear* may be found the origins of culture as violence: “Throughout the period of Western modernity,” he writes, “it has been customary to think of culture and violence as antithetical terms”; Barker contends, however, that

‘culture’ does not necessarily stand in humane opposition to political power and social inequality, but may be profoundly in collusion

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with it, not the antidote to generalized violence, but one of its more seductive strategies. (viii)

(The “seductive” aspects of Lear’s violence – the depiction of violence, or the threat of violence, against women’s bodies – is addressed quite perceptively in the work of Cynthia Marshall and Pascale Aebischer. Barker rejects the possibility for a cathartic ending to Lear, seeing its restoration of order as a temptation for its audience to forget the realpolitik it has just beheld:

it is certainly difficult [Barker observes] to believe that ‘feudalism’ (and still less Tudor Absolutism) was ever in fact animated by some inner Cordelian principle of chaste and natural modesty – rather than, say, the ruthless exploitation of the rural populace. (30)

(A footnote of opposition here: Barish argues that violence in Shakespearean drama is linked with “unruliness, disorder, tyranny, and whatever interferes with life. In short,” he concludes, Shakespeare is “civilized and civilizing” (121).)

Barker’s anatomy of the play’s larger cultural violence (initiating a violent culture) is complemented by readings that address the problem of the play’s aesthetics of violence – particularly the play’s violent misogyny. For Aebischer, Lear is “unashamedly gendered” and seems to encourage in its viewers and critics an acceptance

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of “the gender stereotypes and valorization of aged masculinity” in the play “as unproblematic” (155); “When I weep at the end of a performance of King Lear,” she writes,

I am never quite certain whether it is in empathy for the infinite sorrow of the dying king or in rage at letting myself be manipulated into sharing this sorrow. (155)

And for Marshall, Lear “determinedly wrenches readers or viewers past the bounds of emotional comfort, past even the certainty of [their own] physical safety” (1). (In teaching the play I have often asked students if the actor playing Gloucester could be hurt, or risk being hurt, or seem to have been hurt, in leaping from Dover cliff.) The “formal and structural excessiveness of the play’s design,” Marshall adds, “have led some to speculate that Shakespeare was purposefully tormenting his audience” (1). Not only, and perhaps not primarily, is the audience subjected to purposeful tormenting, I would argue, but also, and perhaps primarily, the aesthetics of the theater are tormented as well – and particularly the “Cordelian principle” that suffering has meaning, that seeing it, or hearing of it, can do some good “despite our natures.”
For what remains extraordinarily disquieting about *King Lear* is that, in order to experience the play as cathartic, a bit of *misprision* may be necessary on the part of the audience: *misprision*, that is, of Aristotelian catharsis itself. A modern audience, schooled in a version of catharsis that emphasizes the purgation, or cleansing, of troubling emotions (specifically pity and fear) that are aroused by the act of beholding tragic events, will seek in *Lear’s* ending a release and recovery from such emotional disturbance (and, like Johnson, be terribly disappointed in the play’s inexact, messy performance of such purgation). Despite the nature of catharsis as Aristotle (may have) intended it, Andrew Ford explains, it is now taken to mean that:

> To feel pity . . . we must first judge that the suffering is undeserved; to feel fear, we must calculate that a given disaster is such as might happen to us. Such complexes of thought and feeling [he continues] have no need to be ‘purged’ . . . and one can go further to maintain that attending tragic plays habituates us to feel the right emotions toward the right objects, which is a major condition for Aristotelian ‘virtue’ or human excellence.  

Rather than a “gross orgy of weeping,” Ford concludes, catharsis is “a structured evocation of emotions that shapes them so they may better conform to proper judgments in real life” (113). (Ford, incidentally, does not entirely agree with this interpretation,

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noting that it overlooks Aristotle’s more developed discussion of catharsis in relation to music in the *Politics.* In this sense, we should not expect to leave feeling purged after a performance of *Lear;* our ability to “conform” our judgment may, if anything, be overdeveloped. The opposite view is well expressed by the late Susan Sontag: the danger is that “As one can become habituated to horror in real life,” she writes in *Regarding the Pain of Others,* “one can become habituated to the horror of certain images.”

We may be free, then, to ask the abiding question: is *Lear,* or is it not, cathartic; does the play take “pitiable and terrible events,” in the words of A. D. Nuttall, and, in giving them a “palpably fictious grandeur,” thereby “releas[e] our emotions from immediate practical responsibility,” so that a “majesty” that “permits actual enjoyment” is achieved? The question resists an answer, but “Speak you on,” as Edmund might say.

And perchance Edmund holds the answer. If he is re-made at the play’s end through a process of aesthetic instruction, the accomplishment – while certainly good for Edmund’s soul – seems to do little real good. The dying Edmund achieves the proper Aristotelian ability to judge his own actions – to measure the degree to which they “conform” to the good – and, learning to be virtuous through acting virtuously, chooses to do good by correcting those evils he has brought about: in the former, he succeeds; in the latter, he fails miserably. Or rather – he fails not because of his own failure to act

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(though that will be debated momentarily) but because fortune, or chance, or merely the banality of belatedness, interferes with and prevents good from being done: prevents, that is, the revocation in time of the writ that seals the deaths of Lear and Cordelia. The result is the same: apart from the good it does Edmund’s soul, his rehabilitation (inarguably a good) seems to serve no purpose (in performance, do, or should, Edgar and Albany notice that Edmund seems to be undergoing some sort of “bursting” of his own cruel selfishness? Edmund’s suffering with those he made suffer takes place, as Auden would say, off in a corner of Shakespeare’s stage). Is the purpose of the rehabilitation, following Barker and Aebischer, to draw the audience into a collusion of sympathy for Edmund, so that sympathies aroused for him as we behold his ability to share the cathartic burden with us prepares us for the feelings of sorrow we are “manipulated” into having for Lear when he carries Cordelia onstage?

Any temptation to feel sympathy for Edmund (following Edgar’s lead) is tempered by Albany’s anti-cathartic unwillingness to grant pity at the deaths of Goneril and Regan: “This judgment of the heavens” upon them, he says, “that makes us tremble” with Aristotelian fear, “Touches us not with pity.” Albany judges that their suffering was deserved, and so not deserving to be called cathartic.

If not exactly cathartic, then, what is it that “moves” Edmund? And why does it fail? Destruction in King Lear, Nuttal observes, “is not halted at the level of the protagonist; it extends itself to the form of his descent and engulfs the spectator” (121). In that sense, Edmund represents his beholders, the passive audience wounded by the
play’s violence – those wanting to prevent its evils, but prevented by the passive, spectatorial role we play from doing so. For Edmund is now an audience for piteous tales. It has taken violence to his person and the approach of death (a terrible price to pay, indeed) to restore – or implant within his body itself – a capacity to see events (especially violent ones) from the audience’s perspective; and becoming like the audience paradoxically allows Edmund to reject the evil plots of his theatrical machinations. That seems good, if untimely.

But Edmund only hopes for “some good,” after all, to come from his nascent ability to show empathy. And the achievement of that good depends upon the workings of chance (perchance some good). But there would have been a better chance, perhaps, for things to have gone differently if Edmund had not asked Edgar to “speak on” – an instance, that is, in which Edmund, having become entranced by a piteous tale, succumbs to one of the most vehement charges against theater in Shakespeare’s day: it takes one’s mind off God. It takes Edmund’s mind off the need to act virtuously to save Lear and Cordelia. Such failure has terrible consequences.

At the risk of extrapolating from this passage that Shakespeare, in his later career, may have held a view of theater as an art that fails more often than it succeeds, the almost-comic (if it weren’t so tragic) inefficacy of Edmund’s aesthetic redemption seems to imply that deriving “some good” from theater is all that may be hoped for. At key moments throughout the play, Shakespeare violates the audience’s suspension of disbelief (especially at Dover); and the spectacle of violence, especially when
“excessive,” risks (among other things) the Johnsonian turning away, or the erasure of the boundary between the world and the stage (how real should the blinding of Gloucester appear?). In Edmund, perhaps Shakespeare reveals the unexpected aspect of the limits of theater: that is, what is the good of an art (of his art) that fails? Perhaps it is worth considering whether the violence of Lear is so “excessive” because such violence serves to “burst” – or cut – the boundary between fiction and the real, in the sense that theatrical violence, for Shakespeare, shows (if only in the difficulty associated with sustaining the audience’s participation in the illusion) a way out of theater’s “manipulations.” It is worth considering, then, whether Shakespeare uses violence to “burst” his theater (whether smilingly or not is open to debate). And it remains, following Aebischer and Marshall, to puzzle over the energy required (or reserved for) the recuperation of the play’s masculine subjects at the expense of the many deaths of Shakespearean women – and the failure of that effort.

It may not be that Shakespeare shares the anti-theatrical distrust, or disgust, with theater, but Edmund’s failure stands as a reproach to our faith in catharsis. His inability (or the plot of circumstances against him that prevent his enacting a revocation of his writ) to “do some good” – with the result that further violence (the worst of the play) takes place; this may even suggest that Shakespeare represents violence as the necessary element in the destruction of a misplaced faith (an idolatry, as enemies of the stage argued) in the power of theater to do (some) good. Edmund hears a very piteous tale – he does not see it enacted (he leaves before Gloucester’s blinding; he is taken away before Lear brings out Cordelia in his arms). It is not the Aristotelian power of theater to instill
virtue through the (visual) enactment of tragic events that incite pity and fear that
redeems Edmund: spectacle has done nothing good for him; in hearing, and not seeing,
he is restored – and in that Edmund gives considerable comfort to the “anti-theatrical
prejudice.” And that can’t be good.