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The Tragedy of Kindness in *King Lear*

JASON A. KERR

King Lear depicts a world governed largely by cruelty, especially cruelty within families. The familial context of this cruelty provides the play with one of its key words—unkindness—beginning with France’s characterization of Cordelia’s family as “unkind” (I.i.262).¹ “Unkind” here means two things: acting cruelly, or acting out of keeping with family obligation. The etymological link between these two ideas suggests that family ties ought to produce benevolent actions, but *King Lear* thoroughly dismantles this notion in the first two acts, bringing the problem of unkindness to its crescendo as Goneril and Regan drive Lear into the storm and, at the end of act III, with Cornwall and Regan’s violent removal of Gloucester’s eyes. Cruelty, on these terms, arises from a failure to recognize family as family: it is a problem of Aristotelian *anagnorisis*, resolvable by a moment of realization.² In tragedy, this realization amounts, as Gerard F. Else puts it, to “uncover[ing] a horrible discrepancy between two sets of relationships: on the one hand the deep ties of blood, on the other a casual or real relation of hostility that has supervened or threatened to supervene upon it.”³ Kinship should necessarily lead to kindness; and when a “horrible discrepancy” broaches this necessity, it becomes the fatal engine on which tragic action turns as justice—kindness—reasserts itself.

The tragedy in *King Lear*, however, seems to be of a different sort, given the placement of the scene where Lear and Cordelia reconcile (IV.vii) between their initial rupture and their eventual demise. “Unkindness,” in the sense of the violation of biological

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kinship ties, drives much of the play's action, but it cannot quite explain the tragedy of act V. Instead, I argue, the play's concluding tragedy turns on a concept of kindness grounded in freedom rather than the necessity of biological kinship. The play links unkindness and freedom early, when Lear treats kinship bonds as something that he can dissolve by choice, through performative speech:

Here I disclaim all my paternal care,
Propinquity and property of blood,
And as a stranger to my heart and me
Hold thee from this for ever.

(I.i.114–7)

Paul A. Kottman emphasizes the resulting element of freedom when he argues that the play's tragedy lies in its reminder "of how fragile our ties to one another are and how easily they can come undone"—understanding kinship in anthropological terms as a cultural artifact rather than a biological reality.⁴ Treating kinship as a cultural artifact decouples it—and, by extension, kindness—from necessity, which opens up the possibility that the reconciliation scene is not a case of *anagnorisis*, in which Lear and Cordelia rediscover the kinship that always was, but rather a study in kindness as an act of human freedom, in which they create a new kinship in place of the one that they sundered in act I.

The play's account of kinship bonds that can freely be undone and remade bears some resemblance to Hegelian recognition, or *Anerkennung*. For Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, recognition has to do with a mutual acknowledgment unfolding in relation rather than the (re)discernment of a person's identity.⁵ Such recognition emerges, Hegel argues, from a life-or-death struggle: both parties stake their lives and fight for survival until, in the outcome used as an example, one person, preferring life, "surrenders his claim for recognition," recognizes the other as superior, and instantiates a master-slave relationship.⁶ Alternatively, the struggle can issue in more mutual forms of recognition, a "[u]niversal self-consciousness" in which "each knows itself recognised in the other freeman, and is aware of this in so far as it recognises the other and knows him to be free."⁷ In *King Lear*, as in Hegel, the bonds of recognition are made, rather than discovered in the Aristotelian manner.⁸

Unlike in Hegel, though, *King Lear* grounds mutual recognition in a struggle that is intrapersonal rather than interpersonal.⁹

The play dramatizes this struggle for Lear in acts III and IV, as he slowly learns to recognize in himself a kind of kinship that consists in universally shared human vulnerability—an ontological vulnerability—and that therefore transcends the narrower ambit of biological kinship.¹⁰ Lear's experience in the storm and its aftermath slowly teaches him that his earlier unkindness resulted from the way that his own attempts at invulnerability cut him off from kinship and enabled him to treat kinship as disposable, something that he had power to dissolve. In the reconciliation scene, then, kindness emerges as a free decision to see ontological vulnerability as an occasion for kinship rather than cruelty, with Edmund as the play's embodiment of the alternative. Unlike the putative necessity of kinship and kindness, the play shows that ontological vulnerability is ambivalent, leaving humans to choose between kindness and cruelty.¹¹ Pace Hegel, the play does not make interpersonal struggle a necessary component of human relationships. In *King Lear*, for all its bleakness, violence is not ontological. Rather, its bleakness comes from treating violence as a product of freedom.

The brutal act V that follows the reconciliation shows, with Edmund's help, that kindness has a tragic side. Tragedy arises from the way that the transformations it effects are themselves vulnerable, because kindness as the play conceives it is fundamentally at odds with necessity. *King Lear*, then, is a tragedy about the fragility of kindness. Amid all the cruelty that characterizes the play, the refusal of kinship on every conceivable ground, the play uses kindness to reveal the possibility of a different world, one that sees in common human vulnerability the possibility of kinship rather than violence. If only momentarily, the play shows what it would mean, in Kelly Oliver's words, "to go beyond recognition to consider our proximity to those whom we do not recognize," by reframing recognition around shared vulnerability rather than ontologized struggle.¹² That is, the play hints at the prospect of a justice that is not merely a pretext for reinforcing kinship bonds through exclusionary violence. *King Lear* is a tragedy not because of everything bad that happens in it, but because freedom and vulnerability come intertwined. Because we are all in each other's hands, the play shows, that other, kinder, more just world can slip away at the merest breath.

I. THE FAILURE OF KINSHIP

Recognition certainly operates as a struggle in the play's opening scene, building on the uneven distribution of vulnerability and Lear's tendency to understand vulnerability only in negative terms, as susceptibility to harm. Age has made Lear weak, and weak kings are manifestly susceptible to harm; for this reason, he declares:

'tis our fast intent
To shake all cares and business from our age,
Conferring them on younger strengths, while we
Unburdened crawl toward death.

(I.i.37–40)

Lear acknowledges his vulnerability to death, but only in the context of the vulnerability attending his diminishing monarchical strength. Giving up rule could be a way of owning his mortality, but Lear's subsequent insistence that "we shall retain / The name, and all th'addition to a king" suggests a hope that the trappings of monarchy might offer some protection against the vulnerabilities that come with being an old man shorn of worldly power (I.i.136–7). Lear acknowledges his vulnerability, but only defensively, in order to stage attempts at mitigation through a struggle for recognition that he hopes to control by retaining the privileges of monarchy without the responsibility.

The recognition that Lear seeks takes the form of relational loyalty, and in this respect the opening scene participates in the vexed dynamics of early modern loyalty oaths, across multiple dimensions of struggle: between internal conviction and external profession, between imperatives of honesty and self-preservation, and between the aspirational all-seeing eye of the sovereign and the irreducible inwardness of the subject.¹³ The framework of vulnerability adds yet another dimension to these dynamics, reframing loyalty in relational terms that put the parties in each other's hands. In the love-test, then, Lear sets out to manage his own vulnerability by gaining assurance that his daughters—Cordelia in particular—will care for him. He seems, at least initially, less aware of the vulnerabilities he thereby imposes on them through the implied threat of disinheritance should they not play the roles he has scripted for them—a threat whose possibility may not occur to anyone until disappointment prompts Lear to threaten Cordelia: "Mend your speech a little, / Lest you may mar your

fortunes" (I.i.94–5). This unawareness, along with the difference in the distribution of vulnerability, sets the stage for struggle. Lear is aware that he can be harmed, but neither he nor Cordelia seems quite aware of the greater degree to which he can harm her.

Lear's approach to his own vulnerability exacerbates the struggle by cutting Cordelia off from what she most wants: a love that is not reducible to loyalty. As he banishes Cordelia, Lear equates her exposure of his vulnerability to the existentially threatening violence of the "barbarous Scythian, / Or he that makes his generation messes" (I.i.117–8)—comparisons showing that Lear understands vulnerability only as susceptibility to harm. In his own mind, then, he seems to be acting less out of irrational wrath than an entirely justified need for self-protection. He is not punishing Cordelia, at least not primarily; he is looking after his mortal frailty by banishing any threats the moment they crop up.

But by construing vulnerability solely in terms of susceptibility to harm, Lear is also shutting himself off from vulnerability's capacity to ground human connection.¹⁴ Lear's attempted denial of his own vulnerability thus prevents him from seeing love as anything other than a performance of power or a display of loyalty—prevents him from seeing the potential for care in Cordelia's response. How, after all, could someone love him in his frailty, given his assiduous work to keep that frailty out of everyone's sight, including his own? Frailty, for Lear, is only an opportunity for someone to hurt him, and he cannot imagine that it might also be an opportunity for someone to be tender to him. By connecting his request for expressions of love to the promise of land and political power, Lear closes off, however inadvertently, the possibility of anything like affection. He does not want affection; he wants loyalty that can serve to protect him from the vulnerability that attends giving up real political power.

If critics have long debated whether Cordelia in this first scene acts like a good daughter or a bad daughter, this ambiguity is simply a structural consequence of Lear's attempts to procure invulnerability for himself. The structure that Lear has established for the situation makes it impossible for any of the daughters to be good or bad. Goneril and Regan, often too easily read as hypocrites, also prove ambiguous. I could ask whether understanding their father and giving him what he wants makes them bad daughters, but on a deeper level he seems to have allowed them little opportunity to understand love in terms other than his. Cordelia, by contrast, seems to grasp the possibility of a love beyond what her father and sisters imagine, and yet the

structural situation prevents her from communicating this love in any way that he can hear.

Cordelia's struggle to have Lear recognize her love unfolds through the asides that precede her first address to him. When Goneril offers a florid speech that culminates in her professing "A love that makes breath poor and speech unable," Cordelia responds by saying, "What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent" (I.i.60 and 62). Goneril insists that her love exceeds the capacities of speech, in a fine pentameter line no less, and Cordelia sardonically draws attention to the fiction. A similar aside following Regan's speech finds Cordelia "sure [that her] love's / More ponderous than [her] tongue" (I.i.77–8). In these speeches, Cordelia is asserting that language cannot provide access to the truth of her love. The trouble is not that words cannot communicate her love, but rather that Lear cannot recognize her love as love. That being the case, it does not matter what she says. Her struggle, therefore, is not merely about finding the right words to communicate her love in the face of her sisters' hypocritical hyperbole. Instead, her struggle is premised fundamentally on the fact that someone else is the gatekeeper of which speech counts and which does not, and the primary feature of speech that counts is that it recognizes the gatekeeper's authority as such. The recognition that Lear seeks requires Cordelia's submission, in keeping with Hegel's master-slave outcome. Given the inequality already present from the outset, through the relationships of father/daughter and ruler/subject, circumstances weigh against Lear recognizing Cordelia's love, because that would require his acquiescence to terms other than his own—an unlikely outcome, if not inevitably so.

In any case, Cordelia struggles as if the outcome were not foreordained. She is not confident that her words can convey her meaning—"Love, and be silent"—and yet she speaks, if only the paradoxical "Nothing, my lord," followed by the protestation "Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth. I love your majesty / According to my bond, no more nor less" (I.i.87 and 91–3). In the struggle to communicate her love, Cordelia—perhaps unintentionally—exposes in Lear the very vulnerability he hopes to mitigate. In Lear's framework, love can only be a bond, or obligation—an oath of loyalty to one's sovereign. By naming what Lear is actually asking instead of what he thinks he is asking, Cordelia lays bare the structure of the situation. But whereas Goneril and Regan hide the ambiguity of their positions behind their speeches, Cordelia publicly presents herself as trapped in the unjust situation that her father has created.

Precisely by loving her father, Cordelia renders herself vulnerable to his power, and this vulnerability itself challenges the structure of the situation. Cordelia's struggle for recognition consists in this challenge: she articulates her love by showing how the situation prevents her from articulating it, and this gesture threatens Lear's hoped-for invulnerability and the relational superiority it requires. Because Lear understands vulnerability only in terms of harm, he cannot see the tenderness in Cordelia's words. He only sees the threat. When Lear lashes out, then, by disclaiming Cordelia as his child, withdrawing her dowry, and banishing her, he is simultaneously attempting to shore up his desired invulnerability from her attack and tacitly admitting that he was never as invulnerable as his bluster was meant to imply.

For Lear, recognition was not supposed to involve a struggle—just pretty speeches from his daughters, delivered on command. On the one side, then, we have aspirational invulnerability granted without a struggle, and on the other we have a struggle built on the exposure of a relatively powerless person's vulnerability, in keeping with Judith Butler's description of protest as a "deliberate mobilization of bodily exposure."¹⁵ In Cordelia's case, exposure leads to sundered kinship and the dissolution of Lear's obligation to kindness. She may act as if this outcome were not inevitable—and I will argue that it is not—but the unequal position from which she began her struggle made it more than probable. From this perspective, Cordelia's stubborn insistence on love might even look like tragic hamartia, a case of hubristic overreach that leads to her doom: better to submit and claim her more opulent third (I.i.86). But if such a course might have steered her clear of tragedy, the alternate port it offers hardly looks like comedy. A happier outcome—or at least the possibility of one, before things get worse—will require that Lear find a different perspective on vulnerability, one that includes its capacity for connection.

II. KINSHIP AND VULNERABILITY

Once Cordelia departs, Lear's remaining kinship ties with his daughters dissolve rapidly, as Goneril and Regan, leaving behind any moral ambiguity that may have surrounded them in the first scene, conspire to abandon Lear to the storm. But when Regan dispenses with the last knight—"What need one?" (II.ii.452)—the possibility of a different kind of kinship emerges as Lear for the first time in the play acknowledges his participation in a shared human vulnerability:

O reason not the need! Our basest beggars
 Are in the poorest thing superfluous;
 Allow not nature more than nature needs,
 Man's life is cheap as beast's.

(II.ii.453–6)

In this moment Lear allows that a bare animal vulnerability—nature in his second usage—runs through human life, but he also implies that treating humans as merely animal—nature in his first usage—is unjust. Lear is appealing to a kind of justice grounded in care, understood in Virginia Held's terms as a practice that "builds trust and mutual concern and connectedness between persons."¹⁶ This appeal becomes clear when Lear's speech is compared with the newly eyeless Gloucester's later comparison between human and animal life: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, / They kill us for their sport" (IV.i.38–9). This total exposure to wanton cruelty is what it would mean for "Man's life" to be as "cheap as beast's." Lear is arguing, in a way that he doesn't yet realize contradicts his own earlier behavior, that humanity—or perhaps humaneness—depends on a kind of freely chosen human connection or kinship that at once acknowledges and transcends bare life, or mere blood relations.¹⁷

By acknowledging bare life, this form of kinship grounds itself on what Gilson calls ontological vulnerability.¹⁸ Initially, and unsurprisingly, Lear understands the vulnerability occasioned by the storm primarily in terms of potential harm to himself, daring the elements to "Singe [his] white head!" (III.ii.6). In a defiance born of self-pity, Lear calls on the storm to continue the violence begun against him by his daughters: "Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire are my daughters; / I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness" (III.ii.15–6). In this moment, Lear's perspective on vulnerability shifts slightly. Rather than seeing the vulnerability occasioned by his daughters—his being divested of knights and driven out into the storm—as ontological, a threat to his existence, he comes to understand it as situational, the product of human power exercised to procure advantage for some at the expense of others.

If the vulnerability occasioned by the storm also harms Lear, he recognizes that it is not unjust in the same situational way, in keeping with Jesus's statement that God "sendeth rain on the just and unjust" (Matt. 5:45 [Geneva]). The storm opens Lear to the idea that vulnerability is a shared, constitutive component of natural life. He frames this shared vulnerability through a doubled language of slavery. As a "poor, infirm, weak and despised old

man," he is a passive "slave" to the elements, and yet the elements are not fully agents themselves: as "servile ministers," they act upon him in concert with his daughters, but at the behest of someone (or something) else (III.ii.19–21). This complex agency, mirrored in Lear's active raging against the storm that lashes him, captures acutely the way that vulnerability and natural interdependence go together. Even the elements themselves cannot escape participation in the web of kinship as they macrocosmically fling Lear's words back at him. Because everyone is vulnerable to the elements—to some degree, at least—everyone shares a kinship of sorts with the elements, and, mediated by those elements, with everyone else.

Through the middle of the play, then, Lear is feeling his way toward a different kind of kinship—one that carries its own ethical quandaries. If kinship as a construct limits kindness to kin, however construed, and the play to this point has emphasized how little kinship—even when recognized in the Aristotelian sense—guarantees kindness, then kindness seems in fact to operate on altogether different grounds. But if kindness creates kinship rather than the other way around, the question of that new kinship's ethical structure still remains. It is not enough, in other words, that Lear discovers ontological vulnerability as a new basis for kinship; he also has to find his way toward an ethically tenable form of relationality grounded on ontological vulnerability.

Lear's relational dilemma turns on what Edith Stein would come to call the problem of empathy. Writing, as a student of Husserl, from a phenomenological perspective, Stein describes empathy as "the experience of foreign consciousness in general," emphasizing that empathy requires experiencing said consciousness precisely as foreign.¹⁹ Empathy, for Stein, is therefore not a feeling of oneness with another's feeling—as in, I feel your pain—but a recognition that one's own emotional state is responsive to the perception of another's—as in, I feel sad because you seem to be in pain. Stein thus refuses the idea that empathy entails identification with the other or union with the other's emotional state. Paul Bloom observes that empathy-as-identification can entail the same ethical problems that arise from kinship in the usual sense, arguing that "it's far easier to empathize with those who are close to us, those who are similar to us, and those we see as more attractive or vulnerable and less scary ... In this regard, empathy distorts our moral judgments in pretty much the same way that prejudice does."²⁰

Lear finds himself in this quandary of over-identification when he encounters the disguised Edgar. His awareness begins abstractly, as his experience in the storm leads to a moment of imaginative empathy:

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'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.

(III.iv.28–33)

Here, Lear does seem aware of situational differences in vulnerability: his exposure to one night in the storm is not the same as that endured night after night by the homeless. Furthermore, he acknowledges that in his former situation as a ruler he neglected his obligation to respond to these vulnerabilities with care. He therefore invites the storm to correct him:

Take physic, pomp,
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
And show the heavens more just.

(III.iv.33–6)

His power, he now sees, came with a responsibility to a justice premised on the acknowledgment that humans share ontological vulnerability.

Although he recognizes differences in situational vulnerability in the abstract, Lear's encounter with what he takes to be "the thing itself"—ironically, here, the disguised Edgar—leads him toward empathy as identification or over-identification (III.iv.104). To Edgar's feigned nonsense, Lear replies, "Why, thou wert better in a grave than to answer with thy uncovered body this extremity of the skies" (III.iv.99–100). Asking, "Is man no more than this?" he reflects on what ontological vulnerability means: "Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art" (III.iv.101 and 105–6). These reflections prompt Lear to undertake corrective action: "Off, off, you lendings: come, unbutton here" (III.iv.106–7).²¹ By taking off his clothes in the storm, Lear attempts to take up a position of solidarity with those whose

situational vulnerability exceeds his. In doing so, however, he risks over-identifying with them and therefore appropriating their suffering to his own supposed moral gain.²²

Ironically, Lear's actual descent into madness resolves this risk. Not only does madness increase his exposure, but it also compromises the rational calculations that can lead to over-identification and leads him back to a supposedly natural sense of himself as "every inch a king" (IV.vi.106). This regal identity, though, now comes newly situated in ontological vulnerability, as becomes clear with Lear's response to Gloucester's request to kiss his hand: "Let me wipe it first, it smells of mortality" (IV.vi.129). Their encounter admits the play's first extended taste of mutuality grounded in shared vulnerability; an earlier one appears in act III, scene ii, lines 68–71, when Lear notices that the Fool is also cold.²³ The mutuality appears first in a grim joke but then in a moment of empathy. The joke, gruesomely, turns on Gloucester's eyeless state. Edgar has a letter, and Lear asks Gloucester to read it. Gloucester says, "What? With the case of eyes?" (IV.vi.140). To which Lear replies jestingly: "Oh ho, are you there with me? No eyes in your head, nor no money in your purse? Your eyes are in a heavy case, your purse in a light, yet you see how this world goes" (IV.vi.141–4). Gloucester responds poignantly: "I see it feelingly" (IV.vi.145). Punning seems inappropriate to the situation, too lighthearted for the gravity of the moment, and yet Gloucester, ostensibly the one to suffer under the joke's cruel levity, responds with a pun of his own.²⁴ Vulnerable as both men are, jesting at their situation simultaneously names its vulnerability and turns that vulnerability into an occasion for shared laughter. The joke is a way of showing that, painful though it may be, vulnerability cannot be reduced to harm alone because it can also be an occasion for human bonding.

The storm and Lear's subsequent encounter with Gloucester have brought him nearer to seeing shared, ontological human vulnerability as something he might respond to with kindness. Such awareness does not, however, guarantee kindness, as Lear's rage makes evident: "when I have stolen upon these son-in-laws, / Then kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!" (IV.vi.182–3). Lear's hope to kill his sons-in-law at earliest advantage raises a core concern about kindness, one that brings us back again to Hegel's dialectic of recognition. Oliver draws out this concern: "it can be the *recognition* of vulnerability, and even the *recognition* of humanity, that enables the most brutal violence."²⁵ That is, Lear's experiences in the storm have opened him to the possibility of greater empathy

with human suffering, but his jarring pivot to “kill, kill, kill, kill, kill kill!” mere lines after noting that crying is central to the human condition—e.g., “We came crying hither” (IV.vi.174)—may suggest that his expanded empathic capacity links rather than separates the two statements: recognizing vulnerability precisely in its capacity to foster intimacy and connection also has the potential to awaken ever profounder forms of cruelty. The mere recognition of ontological vulnerability as a shared human condition cannot therefore suffice to ground kindness, or to remake the kinship that Lear violently sundered in the first scene.

III. REMAKING KINSHIP

The scene where Lear and Cordelia reconcile offers a case study in making kinship on the basis of shared ontological vulnerability, but through care rather than the struggle posited by Hegelian recognition.²⁶ Here, care entails working to ameliorate undue situational vulnerability based on an awareness of ontological vulnerability. When Lear and Cordelia meet again, the difference in situational vulnerability is extreme: Cordelia now commands an army, and Lear, having been retrieved from his mad ramble in the wilderness, is unconscious. Indeed, Lear’s unconsciousness as the scene begins leaves him wholly in her power, bringing vulnerability’s ambivalence into sharp focus. She could murder him with ruthless ease, and yet instead she prays for the “kind gods” to end his madness: “Cure this great breach in his abused nature; / Th’untuned and jarring senses, O, wind up / Of this child-changed father” (IV.vii.14 and 15–7). Hope of “restoration” leads to further action: “let this kiss / Repair those violent harms that my two sisters / Have in thy reverence made” (IV.vii.26 and 27–9). Seeing his vulnerability, and reminded perhaps of how he treated her when she was in his power, she responds in a way that breaks the cycle of harm and trauma, working to alleviate what Joel Anderson would call Lear’s surplus vulnerability.²⁷

By practicing care, Cordelia responds to unevenly distributed vulnerability by narrowing the gap rather than leveraging it to her own ends, and in this care resides the prospect of a new kind of kinship. Part of Cordelia’s care involves responding to Lear’s own proclivity for violence, but for his own self-protection rather than hers: “Seek, seek for him, / Lest his ungoverned rage dissolve the life / That wants the means to lead it” (IV.iv.18–20). Rather than struggle against him, à la Hegel, she seeks his healing. Admittedly, she stands to benefit from his healing, but alongside the

self-interest in her action comes some risk that his “ungoverned rage” might again fall on her. In seeking his healing, she also places herself to some degree in his hands. Instead of staking her life, Cordelia stakes her vulnerability, in all its ambivalence, and Lear follows suit:

If you have poison for me, I will drink it.
 I know you do not love me, for your sisters
 Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.
 You have some cause, they have not.

(IV.vii.72–5)

For all that the storm taught him about shared ontological vulnerability and the possibility of responding to that vulnerability with care, he is now no longer in a situation where the rain falls on the just and the unjust: he is directly vulnerable to Cordelia, whom he has wronged, and he knows it. Cordelia’s “No cause, no cause” unexpectedly releases Lear from his anticipation of harm and creates the possibility of a different future (IV.vii.75). He is caught off guard, only capable of asking, “Am I in France?” (IV.vii.76). However, an attending gentleman says to Cordelia, “Be comforted, good madam, the great rage / You see is killed in him” (IV.vii.78–9). Lear’s risk in submitting to Cordelia has yielded an unanticipated safety.

Cordelia likewise freely places herself in Lear’s hands. Rather than respond with the violence Lear expects, Cordelia has made herself vulnerable to him. By relinquishing her claim to his just punishment, she opens herself to the possibility that he will return to his formerly abusive ways; but, precisely by allowing for this possibility, she also opens herself to the kind of connection with him whose structural impossibility she was protesting in the first scene. Because she responds to her father’s situational vulnerability in an ameliorative way, kindness creates the possibility for the injustice in his earlier treatment of love to move toward justice.²⁸ She finds at least the hope of the love-relation she had earlier longed for, not by struggling for it but by risking the vulnerability of a connection with someone who may or may not be worthy of her faith. The new kinship that they have forged does not rest on ontological vulnerability in any merely abstract sense. The kindness by which they forged it carries alongside the possibility of redemption and reconciliation the inescapable prospect of failure and ruin.

IV. THE TRAGEDY OF KINDNESS

The reconciliation that Cordelia's kindness brings about is anything but perfect. Notwithstanding Lear's call to "forget and forgive," the Arden editor notes that "Cordelia cannot forget, but insists on trying to put him back on the throne by means of war" (IV.vii.83–4).²⁹ Cordelia practices nonviolence with her father, but not with her sisters, setting the play back on course toward tragedy—perhaps unnecessarily, given the sisters' jealous mutual destruction. She has seen the potential for kindness to transform her relationship with her father, but her relationship with her sisters remains trapped in its earlier dynamics. Her kindness may therefore have a mercenary element because reconciling with Lear can give her war a patina of justice in attempting to restore the rightful king, instead of replaying the sibling rivalry. Lear, meanwhile, attains a beatific state of resolution that is nevertheless tinged with solipsism, as becomes clear when he envisions replaying the moment of forgiveness with Cordelia in prison. The play had begun with Cordelia unjustly trapped in a script of her father's writing, and the only difference now is that he has written himself as the one whose profession must find approbation, enabling him to experience the gratification of forgiveness over and over again. Even though this prospect could afford the possibility of securing reconciliation through iteration, it also replays the earlier harmful dynamic. Being rooted in vulnerability, kindness comes with no guarantees.

The play's concluding turn toward tragedy—in contravention of its source texts—hinges on this fragility of kindness. Having systematically dissolved the bonds of natural kinship, the play shows that a new kind of kinship becomes possible when people freely assume the risk of putting themselves in each other's hands. This mode of kinship particularizes ontological vulnerability, moving from the general sense that everyone is always in everyone else's hands as an inescapable component of existence in the world with others to a particular and freely chosen act of trust. Such acts of trust enable vulnerability to yield something other than harm—the complex affective world of love—and yet harm never leaves the picture. Indeed, the possibility of harm and cruelty even increases.

The play dramatizes this increased capacity for cruelty in the figure of Edmund, who acknowledges vulnerability's capacity for connection. He refuses to let social ties have any claim on him precisely so that he can exploit them in others. His first soliloquy

takes direct aim at the socially constructed nature of kinship, in contrast with the “Nature” he worships as his “goddess,” when he identifies kinship instead with “the plague of custom” and “The curiosity of nations” (I.ii.1, 3, and 4). Because kinship is nothing more than the product of iteration over time—the performativity of custom—it is a fiction that need not define him, or impose any ethical or moral boundaries on him; such is the force conveyed by his increasingly sarcastic repetitions of “legitimate” throughout a speech that culminates in his admission of a plot to destroy his “legitimate” half-brother Edgar (I.ii.16, 18–9, and 21).

Indeed, Edmund’s arc through the play is defined by his cynical approach to affective bonds. At a pivotal moment, Gloucester puts himself in Edmund’s hands by revealing his complicity in Cordelia’s planned invasion: “I have received a letter this night—’tis dangerous to be spoken” (III.iii.9–10). Gloucester acknowledges his own vulnerability, and also that he has made Edmund vulnerable: “pray you, be careful” (III.iii.19). With this disclosure, Gloucester seems to presume that his kinship bond with Edmund—which, even if “acknowledged,” may not be that close: “away he shall again”—allows him to be vulnerable without fear of harm (I.i.23 and 31–2). Perhaps he even hopes that his vulnerable disclosure will strengthen that bond. Edmund, though, betrays him immediately, in a speech that simultaneously disavows kinship and avails himself of its advantages: “This seems a fair deserving and must draw me / That which my father loses, no less than all” (III.iii.22–3).³⁰ Edmund will allow the fiction of kinship to stand, but only when it redounds to his benefit. In this way, he exposes vulnerability and trust as the foundations of kinship. His strategy in the play involves using trust to gain access to vulnerability that he can then exploit to his own ends while, dangerously, presuming his own invulnerable capacity to get away with all of it.

Edmund’s canny understanding of how kinship works thus seems to be the key to his character’s action in the play. He dangles the prospect of kinship before both Goneril and Regan, only to reveal his cynicism in his final soliloquy (V.i.56–70). This speech serves as the epitome of his braggart recklessness, revealing the extent to which he acts on the premise of his own invulnerability. It is telling on this point that when he describes the sisters as “Each jealous of the other as the stung / Are of the adder,” the circle of the adder’s poisonous effect encompasses them, but not him (V.i.57–8). Even in this moment of near-desperation, he does not claim kinship with vulnerable humanity.

The culmination of his approach to kinship and vulnerability comes, though, when he arranges for the Captain to hang Cordelia, enjoining him that “to be tender-minded / Does not become a sword” (V.iii.32–3). With these words, Edmund acknowledges that shared ontological vulnerability can engender kinship and thereby invite a tender rather than a violent response to human vulnerability. He makes this point precisely to ensure that no hint of universal human kinship will get in the way of the Captain’s—and therefore also his own—ambition: “If thou dost / As this instructs thee, thou dost make thy way / To noble fortunes” (V.iii.29–32). The Captain accepts Edmund’s worldview and thereby ensures that the play will end in sorrow and death.

When Edmund himself dies at Edgar’s hands, there is something more than justice at play. Rather, the play is showing that the Machiavellian course Edmund has taken also rests, ultimately, on vulnerability. Edmund does not acknowledge until the end that his struggle with Fortuna could only end one way—he says to Edgar, “But what art thou / That hast this fortune on me?” (V.iii.162–3)—but fortune was always his aim, in the form of his father’s inheritance. Edmund thus becomes the play’s clearest exemplar, *avant la lettre*, of Hegelian recognition, albeit in a way that reveals its inadequacies. As a bastard, Edmund is by definition unrecognized as his father’s son. On this point, Janet Adelman notes the telling contrast between Gloucester’s reference to Edmund as his mother’s son—“a son for her cradle” and “the whoreson”—and Edgar’s self-identification to his dying brother as “thy father’s son” (I.i.14, 22, and V.iii.167).³¹ In order to struggle for the recognition he seeks, Edmund has to disavow kinship, which he sees—with some justice—as the social mechanism of his exclusion. In a confluence of *anagnorisis* and *Anerkennung*, the play literalizes this struggle in the combat between legitimate Edgar, his identity concealed, and illegitimate Edmund, with the result that Edmund, vanquished, abandons his struggle and accedes to the status quo: “Some good I mean to do, / Despite of mine own nature” (V.iii.241–2). Here, he forsakes his earlier goddess to serve his brother’s god of goodness instead, thereby dying as unrecognized as he began. The struggle for recognition need not issue in a master/slave relationship, but the very concept of struggle itself ontologizes violence in a way that makes such an outcome more likely than not.

By pitting Edmund’s narrative arc against that of Lear and Cordelia, the play thus enacts a struggle about recognition. If Lear and Cordelia prove all too vulnerable in the end, neither does

Edmund escape this fate. The bare inescapable fact of human vulnerability thereby emerges as the play's most powerful insistence, the heart of its tragic action. As I have been suggesting, though, the tragedy runs deeper still, because if Edmund shows the vanity of striving for invulnerability—the way that human frailty and suffering always find a way of catching up with those who would flee them—the tenderness with which Cordelia and Lear take up each other's vulnerability proves no less capable of protecting them. In this way, the play depicts kindness as a practice of both beauty and absolute freedom, precisely because of how utterly unnecessary it is, in every sense of the word. But the very qualities that link kindness and freedom also bind it inexorably to the possibility of tragedy. Far worse than having fate always win in the end, as in Edmund's Machiavellian struggle with Fortuna, is knowing that the horror was never actually fated at all.

NOTES

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¹Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. R. A. Foakes, Arden Shakespeare, Third Series, gen. ed. Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson, and David Scott Kastan (Surrey UK: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1997), act I, scene i, line 262, and act IV, scene iii, line 43. All subsequent references to *King Lear* are to this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text by act, scene, and line number.

²Aristotle treats *anagnorisis* in *Poetics* (trans. Gerald F. Else [Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1957], 1452a, p. 32). As will become evident, I use the Greek term to distinguish Aristotelian from Hegelian recognition, or *Anerkennung*. In Shakespeare scholarship, "recognition" overwhelmingly refers to the Aristotelian concept. For example, see W. F. Blissett, "Recognition in *King Lear*," in *Some Facets of "King Lear": Essays in Prismatic Criticism*, ed. Rosalie L. Colie and F. T. Flahiff (London: Heinemann Educational Books; Toronto and Buffalo NY: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1974), pp. 103–16; Helene Keyssar, "I Love You. Who Are You? The Strategy of Drama in Recognition Scenes," *PMLA* 92, 2 (March 1977): 297–306; Barry B. Adams, *Coming-to-Know: Recognition and the Complex Plot in Shakespeare*, Studies in Shakespeare 10 (New York: Peter Lang, 2000). James Kearney offers a Levinasian alternative in "This is above all strangeness': *King Lear*, Ethics, and the Phenomenology of Recognition," *Criticism* 54, 3 (Summer 2012): 455–67. On implicitly Hegelian readings of Shakespeare, such as Stanley Cavell's, see Matthew James Smith, "The Course of Recognition in *Cymbeline*," in *Face-to-Face in Shakespearean Drama: Ethics, Performance, Philosophy*, ed. Smith and Julia Reinhard Lupton (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2019), pp. 77–105.

³ Gerald F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1957), p. 352.

⁴ Paul A. Kottman, *Tragic Conditions in Shakespeare: Disinheriting the Globe*, Rethinking Theory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2009), p. 109. Kottman further develops the relationship between culture and freedom in *Love as Human Freedom*, Square One: First Order Questions in the Humanities (Stanford CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2017).

⁵ Key texts for Hegelian recognition are, in chronological order, part 1 of the *System der Sittlichkeit* [*System for Ethical Life*] (1802/03; George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *System der Sittlichkeit* [Osterwick: A. W. Zickfeldt, 1893], pp. 3–8); the chapter on self-consciousness (*Selbstbewußtsein*), in *Phänomenologie des Geistes* [*Phenomenology of Spirit*] (1807; Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 2d edn. [Berlin: Dunder und Humblot, 1841], pp. 135–45); and the section on self-consciousness in *Encyklopädie der Philosophischen Wissenschaften* [*Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*] (1830; Hegel, *Encyklopädie der Philosophischen Wissenschaften*, 3d edn. [Heidelberg: Oswald, 1830], §424–37, pp. 442–8). Hegel considers recognition among states in *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* [*Philosophy of Right*] (*Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* [Berlin: Dunder und Humblot, 1833], §330–40, pp. 424–30). Recent conversation about Hegelian recognition owes significantly to Axel Honneth's *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. Joel Anderson (Cambridge MA: Polity Press, 1995), originally published as *Kampf um Anerkennung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1992). For synthetic accounts of recognition that include both Aristotle and Hegel, see Paul Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2005).

⁶ Hegel, *The Philosophy of Mind*, in *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind: Translated from the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, trans. William Wallace (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894), p. 56 [Enzyklopädie, §433]. See also Honneth, esp. chap. 3, "The Struggle for Recognition: On the Social Theory of Hegel's Jena *Realphilosophie*," pp. 31–64.

⁷ Hegel, *The Philosophy of Mind*, p. 57 [Enzyklopädie, §436]. On the master-slave dialectic in relation to mutual recognition, see Heikki Ikäheimo, "Hegel's Concept of Recognition—What Is It?," in *Recognition: German Idealism as an Ongoing Challenge*, ed. Christian Krijnen, Critical Studies in German Idealism 10 (Leiden NL: Brill, 2013), pp. 11–38. Robert B. Brandom posits trust rather than struggle as the basis for mutual recognition (*A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's "Phenomenology"* [Cambridge MA: Harvard Belknap, 2019]).

⁸ Smith sees *anagnorisis* as a theatrical means to the restorative grace of mutual *Anerkennung* (pp. 80–1). *King Lear*, in my account, provocatively shows how restorative recognition does not suffice to stave off tragedy.

⁹ The ethics at work in *King Lear* thus resemble the early Stoic quest (*oikeiōsis*) to become a citizen of the "cosmic city" by growing in wisdom. See Katja Maria Vogt, *Law, Reason, and the Cosmic City: Political Philosophy in the Early Stoa* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Erinn Cunniff Gilson argues that ontological vulnerability, to be an ethically sustainable concept, needs to be considered alongside what she calls situational vulnerability, which is "inequitably and hierarchically attrib-

uted" ("Vulnerability and Victimization: Rethinking Key Concepts in Feminist Discourses on Sexual Violence," *Signs* 42, 1 [Autumn 2016]: 71–98, 78). On situational vulnerability, see Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice*, Routledge Series in Ethics and Moral Theory 26 (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 37. Key recent work on the ethics of vulnerability includes Judith Butler, "Violence, Mourning, Politics," in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), pp. 19–49; Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds, eds., *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, Studies in Feminist Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014); Danielle Petherbridge, "What's Critical about Vulnerability? Rethinking Interdependence, Recognition, and Power," *Hypatia* 31, 3 (Summer 2016): 589–604.

¹¹ Gilson, "Vulnerability and Victimization," p. 88.

¹² Kelly Oliver, "Witnessing, Recognition, and Response Ethics," in "The Rhetorical Contours of Recognition," ed. Sarah K. Burgess, special issue, *P&R* 48, 4 (2015): 473–93, 491.

¹³ On early modern oaths, see Perez Zagorin, *Ways of Lying: Dissimulation, Persecution, and Conformity in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1990); Johann P. Sommerville, "Papalist Political Thought and the Controversy over the Jacobean Oath of Allegiance," in *Catholics and the "Protestant Nation": Religious Politics and Identity in Early Modern England*, ed. Ethan Shagan, Politics, Culture, and Society in Early Modern Britain (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2005), pp. 162–84; Conal Condren, *Argument and Authority in Early Modern England: The Presupposition of Oaths and Offices* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006); Todd Butler, "Equivocation, Cognition, and Political Authority in Early Modern England," *TSL* 54, 1 (Spring 2012): 132–54; Butler, "The Oath of Allegiance, Hannah Arendt, and the Trials of Jacobean Political Theology," *JEMCS* 18, 2 (Spring 2018): 60–82. Also germane to this question is Abraham Stoll, *Conscience in Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2017). On oaths in Shakespeare, see John Kerrigan, *Shakespeare's Binding Language* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2016).

¹⁴ As Gilson puts it: "Repudiating vulnerability thus means repudiating the condition that makes possible our pursuits, even the misguided pursuit of invulnerability and self-sufficiency" ("Vulnerability and Victimization," p. 76).

¹⁵ Judith Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Durham NC and London: Duke Univ. Press, 2016), pp. 12–27, 26. My broader argument is in part a rejoinder to Butler's Hegelian grounding of recognition in struggle.

¹⁶ Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006), p. 42.

¹⁷ Kottman understands freedom in Hegelian terms as "a kind of social achievement" (*Love as Human Freedom*, p. 6). With Kottman in *Tragic Conditions*, I am arguing that a kinship compatible with freedom cannot be reducible to blood ties.

¹⁸ Gilson writes that "vulnerability is a fundamental, unavoidable dimension of the human condition" ("Vulnerability and Victimization," p. 78). On "ontological" vulnerability, see p. 87 and Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, p. 37.

¹⁹ Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. Waltraut Stein, vol. 3 of *Collected Works of Edith Stein*, 3d edn., 3 vols. (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1989), p. 11.

²⁰ Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (New York: Ecco, 2016), p. 31.

²¹ Laurie Shannon reads this speech as marking the attainment of a human vulnerability stripped of its animal supplements, a negative form of human exceptionality (*The Accommodated Animal: Cosmopolity in Shakespearean Locales* [Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2013], pp. 170–3.)

²² The fact that he is responding to the disguised Edgar instead of a bona fide beggar exposed to the storm adds a layer of complication here; see Giulio J. Pertile, “*King Lear* and the Uses of Mortification,” *SQ* 67, 3 (Fall 2016): 319–43. Because Edgar aims at disguise rather than empathy, his decision is subject to a different moral calculus than Lear’s.

²³ Shannon, identifies this moment as “Lear’s first act of ‘kind-ness’ in the play” (p. 168).

²⁴ Or, for Cavell’s idea that this line “is the only active cruelty given to Lear by Shakespeare,” see “The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*,” chap. 2 of *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 39–123, 50. I agree with Cavell that Lear is still avoiding love in this scene, but not to the degree that Cavell insists; the positive potentialities of vulnerability are active here as well as the negative ones (pp. 60–1).

²⁵ Oliver, p. 479.

²⁶ Kottman argues that care is inadequate to the torture imposed on Gloucester, by way of driving home what he sees as the play’s tragic refusal of any cathartic insight (*Tragic Conditions*, p. 128). My argument grants the inadequacy of care but argues instead that the play’s tragedy requires presenting care as a possibility, precisely for the purpose of making its inadequacy felt in the end.

²⁷ For Anderson, in conversation with Honneth, this term refers to a vulnerability that passes intolerably beyond the threshold of vulnerability on which all human connection depends (“Autonomy and Vulnerability Entwined,” in *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, pp. 134–161, 151–7).

²⁸ Compare Hegel’s dialectical account of confession and forgiveness, as discussed in Brandom, which I augment by situating risk and sacrifice in ontological vulnerability (“Confession and Forgiveness, Recollection and Trust,” chap. 16 in *A Spirit of Trust*, pp. 583–635).

²⁹ Foakes, p. 356n83–84.

³⁰ Kottman points out that Edmund’s investment in inheritance comes precisely at the expense of any obligation arising from family ties, biological or otherwise (*Tragic Conditions*, pp. 84–7).

³¹ Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare’s Plays, “Hamlet” to “The Tempest”* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 106.