

Original Paper

Edgar and the Nature of Identity in *King Lear*

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Abstract

In William Shakespeare's play *King Lear*, the relationship between Edgar, his father the Earl of Gloucester and his half-brother Edmund form the subplot of this play. Edgar is the natural son of Gloucester by marriage while Edmund is an unnatural son or bastard. At Gloucester's death, Edgar, as the legitimate or natural heir of his father, will receive all lands, titles, status and place in the dynastic hierarchy pertaining to an earl. Edmund, unnatural, receives nothing. Edmund wants to replace Edgar as his family's heir and hatches a plot to destroy this natural order. In so doing, Edmund succeeds in turning identity on its head and forces Edgar into questioning the strength of this natural order and even identity as a cultural concept, since it so easily can be manipulated and lead his own father to disown him. The strong natural familial bonds found at the beginning of the play are easily severed. Edmund, as a duplicitous character, is the classic example of the Machiavel, one who manipulates others to ensure that he gets what he wants. This kind of person is driven entirely by self interest. Edgar loses his identity as the heir to his family's earldom thanks to his credulous nature and Edmund's abuse of his naivete. As a result of these circumstances, Edgar has to feign madness in order to escape his predicament. Edgar goes from the son of the Earl of Gloucester at the beginning of the play, into a forced series of disguises in the middle of the play (thanks to Edmund's treachery), only to come out at the other end enhanced, as someone who understands himself and the society he lives in.

Introduction

William Shakespeare's *King Lear* has a subplot involving the Earl of Gloucester and his two sons Edgar and Edmund. The story is about identity. Called nature in the play, it is a term in *King Lear* that refers to an early English 17th century cultural definition of family. Edgar is the natural son of Gloucester by marriage while Edmund is an unnatural son or bastard. At Gloucester's death, Edgar, as the legitimate or natural heir of his father, will receive all lands, titles, status and place in the aristocratic hierarchy pertaining to an earl. Edmund, unnatural, receives nothing.

Edmund wants to be the Earl of Gloucester. To do so he initiates a plot to banish Edgar and thus upend this natural order. In so doing, Edmund succeeds in turning identity on its head and forces Edgar into questioning the strength of this natural order and even identity as a cultural concept, since it so easily can

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be manipulated and lead his own father to disown him.

Edmund exposes identity's frail construct, controls it for his own ends and upsets its entire justification, legitimate succession based upon marriage. On the other hand, Edmund's easy success at overturning this natural order leads Edgar to an awareness of himself, his place in society, its fragility and his own willingness to persevere and come out stronger; with more responsibility than he ever would have had, had things never changed and he had followed the ordinary line of succession and become Earl of Gloucester on the death of his father.

I

In Act I, scene ii, Edmund's second spoken word is Nature. He acknowledges its power over him in custom and law yet resolves in this scene to overcome it and take from Edgar all of his inheritance:

Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law
My services are bound. Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me?
For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines
Lag of a brother? Why bastard? Wherefore base?
When my dimensions are as well compact,
My mind as generous and my shape as true
As honest madam's issue? Why brand they us
With base? With baseness, bastardy? Base, base?
Who in this lusty stealth of nature take
More composition and fierce quality
Than doth within a dull stale tired bed
Go to the creating of a whole tribe of fops
Got 'tween a sleep and wake. Well, then,
Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land.
Our father's love is to the bastard Edmund
As to the legitimate. Fine word 'legitimate'! (I, ii, 1-18)

The word 'legitimate' in the last line is a synonym for nature in Edmund's soliloquy. However, Edmund justifies his plot for overtaking Edgar's position by looking to nature in his own way. He avers that he was conceived in more honest circumstances than his brother. His own being the result of the, "lusty stealth of nature" (I, ii, 11), rather than the insipid conventionality of marriage¹. And for him to override the cultural obstacle of his birth, being born out of wedlock, Edmund must create a plan of his own devising, outside of these norms in order to set Gloucester against Edgar.

Edmund forges a letter in Edgar's name. In it, he has Edgar propose to murder Gloucester so as to inherit his father's earldom while Edgar is still a young man. He doesn't want to wait around for his father to die an old man and Edgar acquire the title in middle age. He wants to be the earl as soon as possible.

In Gloucester's presence Edmund makes to pocket the letter in order to get Gloucester's attention. Gloucester reads the letter. He calls Edgar, "Abhorred villain! Unnatural, detested, brutish / villain — worse than brutish!" (I, ii, 76 - 77) He says that, "These late eclipses in the sun and moon / portend no good to us." (I, ii, 103 - 104) in order to justify Edgar's unnatural desire for parricide².

Edmund, while mocking Gloucester's astrological explanation for Edgar's letter, himself uses eclipses to warn Edgar of the sudden unnatural anger Gloucester now has towards him:

Edmund: I am thinking, brother, of a prediction I read
this other day, what should follow these eclipses.

Edgar: Do you busy yourself with that?

Edmund: I promise you, the effects he writes of succeed
unhappily, as of unnaturalness between the child and
the parent, death, dearth, dissolutions of ancient
amities, divisions in state, menaces and maledictions
against King and nobles, needless diffidences,
banishment of friends, dissipation of cohorts, nuptial
breaches and I know not what. (I, ii, 140 - 149)

Edgar, when he appears in this scene, is a cipher, unable or unwilling to have a thought or opinion or to think critically about his situation. When he enters the scene Edmund calls him a, "catastrophe". (I, ii, 134) Nonentity might be a better term to use here. He is Gloucester's heir but he's naive, without any real world experience and ripe for abuse; perfect for a fully formed villain like Edmund. In fact, Gloucester makes reference to this after reading the forged letter: "My son Edgar, had he a hand to write this? / A heart and brain to breed it in?" (I, ii, 56 - 57) It is also important to note that Edgar doesn't know why his father is so angry with him as Edmund hasn't given him an explanation.

Edmund keeps Edgar in the dark throughout, even urging Edgar to, "Bethink yourself wherein you may have offended / him." (I, ii, 158 - 159) And the scene ends with Edgar hiding out at Edmund's, "retire with me to my lodging", (I, ii, 166) and being promised a chance to eavesdrop on Edmund and Gloucester's conversation in order to find out why Gloucester is so angry with him. And in his final instructions to Edgar, Edmund sets him up for banishment later in Act II, "If you do stir abroad, go armed." (I, ii, 168)

II

In Act II, scene i, Edmund warns Edgar that Gloucester knows he is hiding out with him: "Brother, a word; descend, brother, I say. / My father watches; O sir, fly this place!" (II, i, 20 - 21) Edmund also comes up with a new lie. At this point the main plot of the play breaks into the subplot. Regan, one of King Lear's daughters, and her husband the Duke of Cornwall are coming to Gloucester's. Curan, a servant in Gloucester's household, informed Edmund at the start of Act II that there may be war between the Dukes of Cornwall and Albany, the husband of another daughter of Lear's, Goneril. (Lear has gifted them his kingdom at the beginning of the play.) Edmund takes this information and asks Edgar, "Have you not spoken 'gainst the Duke of Cornwall?" (II, i, 24) Cornwall calls Gloucester, "my noble friend," (II, i, 86) and he, along with his wife Regan, is already aware of Edmund's lies about Edgar: "Since I came hither, / Which I can call but now, I have heard strange news." (II, i, 86 - 87) Regan states the strange news baldly:

What, did my father's godson seek your life?
He whom my father named, your Edgar? (II, i, 91 - 92)

Edmund's counterfeit letter in Edgar's name is already known abroad and is having its effect.

Gloucester is heard offstage making his way toward where Edmund and Edgar are. Referencing I, ii, 68,

Edmund has Edgar draw his sword to make it look like Edmund is defending Gloucester from Edgar. He then tells Edgar to flee, "Fly, brother, fly!" (II, i, 33) Edgar thinks he is fleeing because of what he allegedly said about Cornwall. He still has no idea of the forged letter.

Gloucester arrives just after Edgar leaves. Edmund explains how he protected Gloucester from Edgar and his plan to, "Persuade me to the murder of your lordship." (II, i, 44) And shows the result of his defense of their father, "Look, sir, I bleed." (II, i, 41) This made up duel proves to Gloucester Edmund's fidelity and starts the topsy turvy motions of identity to churn, "Loyal and natural boy, I'll work the means / To make thee capable." (II, i, 84 - 85) With these words, Gloucester promises Edmund that he will make him heir; unnatural though he is.

In Act II, scene ii, Edgar appears on stage alone. He states that he has been outlawed, "I heard myself proclaimed." (II, ii, 172) But he still doesn't know that Edmund is behind it all. He also knows that he cannot escape to a foreign land:

No port is free, no place
That guard and most unusual vigilance
Does not attend my taking (II, ii, 174 - 176)

So without a means of escape as Edgar, Edgar disguises himself as a Bedlam beggar. This is a stock figure of madness for this period, and only the infirm and mentally ill were permitted to beg³. Edgar, however, is not mad. His disguise is more like that of so called "Abraham Men". These men pretended to be from Bethlem Hospital, an institution for the mad⁴. Bethlem when spoken became Bedlam and its personification was Poor Tom:

... am bethought
To take the basest and most poorest shape
That ever penury in contempt of man
Brought near to beast. (II, ii, 177 - 180)

Poor Tom was portrayed as the gibbering, demented mad man going about with a roaring voice, mortifying his arms with, "Pins, wooden pricks, nails, sprigs of rosemary." (II, ii, 187)

By the end of this speech he calls himself Poor Tom, but, more importantly, right after that he says, "That's something yet: Edgar I nothing am." (II, ii, 192)

Edgar, with this new identity, leaves his aristocratic circle and upbringing and goes to the, "low farms, / Poor pelting villages, sheepcotes and mills," (II, ii, 188 - 189); hurling curses and wild prayers and seeking charity.

III

In Act III, scene iv, Edgar, as Poor Tom, emerges from the straw in a hovel that Lear, Kent and the Fool came to at the beginning of this scene. (The main plot enters here once again. Lear is mad, wandering the heath in a violent storm. He is only left with two of the original one hundred of his retinue that was agreed to when he divested himself of his kingdom to his daughters. They are his still loyal Earl of Kent and his jester the Fool. They try to steer him toward a shelter, the hovel from which Edgar appears as Poor Tom.)

Edgar also explicitly calls himself Poor Tom in this scene. He is a self-lacerating lunatic plagued by

imaginary demons⁵. And he acts as if he is being pursued by the "foul fiend." (III, iv, 45) This motif is taken by Shakespeare from Samuel Harsnett's work, *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (1603)². In it, Harsnett gives an account of how exorcists drive devils out of the possessed. This idea of possession and the devil is used by Edgar to enhance his madness and keep his identity hidden from Lear and Kent.

Edgar references numerous names for devils (also found in Harsnett) in Act III, scene iv: Flibbertigibbett², Smulkin², (a 'minor' devil that Harsnett writes takes the form of a mouse), and Modo and Mahu².

Lear, after hearing Edgar refer to so many fiends and devils, asks Edgar, "What is your study?" (III, iv, 154) Edgar's answer may reflect Harsnett once again: "How to prevent the fiend and to kill vermin." (III, iv, 155) Harsnett's devils, not just Smulkin, often take the form of animals.

Edgar plays up his manufactured madness as the situation is still not safe for him to return to himself as Edgar. He sees what has happened to Lear. Lear's daughters, Regan and Goneril, have abandoned him and want him banished altogether so that they can rule free of their father. Lear was once a king but now he is like Edgar, without title, roaming the outdoors, left to the vicissitudes of nature.

In scene v of Act III, Edmund betrays his next victim, the Earl of Gloucester. Edmund again resorts to a letter. This time it is an actual letter to Gloucester from France, the husband to Lear's youngest daughter Cordelia. Gloucester had told Edmund about the letter earlier in the play: "I have / received a letter this night — 'tis dangerous to be spoken / — I have locked the letter in my closet." (III, iii, 9 - 11) Edmund uses it to stir up Cornwall and Regan. "This is the letter which he spoke of, / which approves him an intelligent party to the / advantages of France." (III, v, 10 - 12) The letter details France's plans to come back to England armed, and in the name of his wife Cordelia (She was banished by Lear in the first scene of the play for her unwillingness to flatter Lear in order to receive a part of his kingdom), support Lear against her two sisters Regan and Goneril.

Cornwall and Regan have already warned Gloucester against giving aid to Lear. As Gloucester told Edmund:

When I desired their leave that I
might pity him, they took from me the use of mine own
house; charged me on pain of perpetual displeasure
neither to speak of him, entreat for him, or in any way
sustain him. (III, iii, 2 - 6)

However, Gloucester continued to help Lear, "we must incline to the / King. I will look him and privily relieve him." (III, iii, 13 - 14) So along with the evidence of the letter from France, Cornwall and Regan decide that Gloucester must be severely punished. Cornwall gouges out his eyes. "Lest it see more, prevent it. Out, vile jelly, / Where is thy lustre now?" (III, vii, 82 - 83) And Regan taunts him when he calls out for Edmund to come to his rescue. "Thou call'st on him that hates thee. It was he / That made the overture of thy treasons to us." (III, vii, 87 - 88)

It is an irony that only when he no longer has eyes that he now sees how wrong he was, "O my follies! Then Edgar was abused? / Kind gods, forgive me that and prosper him." (III, vii, 90 - 91)

IV

Edgar opens Act IV, scene i as Poor Tom. In a digression to himself, he thinks it's better to be despised

as Poor Tom openly than to be flattered as Gloucester's heir, yet secretly despised. "Yet better thus, and known to be contemned / Than still contemned and flattered." (IV, i, 1 - 2)

It is after this short spoken prelude that Gloucester enters led by an Old Man. Edgar overhears their conversation and realizes that Gloucester is blind:

Old Man: Alack, sir, you cannot see your way.

Gloucester: I have no way, and therefore want no eyes:
I stumbled when I saw. (IV, i, 19 - 21)

Gloucester knows that Edmund tricked him, setting him up against Edgar on made up charges. Gloucester only hopes that he can meet Edgar one last time so that he can tell him that he was wrong.

... O dear son Edgar,
The food of thy abused father's wrath,
Might I but live to see thee in my touch,
I'd say I had eyes again. (IV, i, 23 - 26)

Fearful of giving up his disguise, even to his blind father, Edgar speaks in an aside about his burden and how he feels vexed at having to continue to be Poor Tom: "Bad is the trade that must play fool to sorrow / Angering itself and others." (IV, i, 40 - 41) The word "trade" spoken above means a "learned" skill. He is Poor Tom, affecting madness, pretending to be a beggar⁶. And Edgar's doubts about concealing himself, keeping up his trade, only continue, "I cannot daub it further —." (IV, i, 55) But he thinks better of it, "And yet I must," (IV, i, 57) before agreeing to lead Gloucester to Dover where Gloucester promises Poor Tom, "I'll repair the misery thou dost bear / With something rich about me." (IV, i, 79 - 80) Gloucester wants Poor Tom to lead him to one of the cliffs at Dover where he can end his own life and give whatever he has on his person to Poor Tom.

In Act IV, scene vi, Edgar takes on a couple of new identities when speaking to Gloucester. At Dover, Gloucester even remarks that Edgar is speaking like a peasant:

Methinks thy voice is altered and thou speak'st
In better phrase and matter than thou didst. (IV, vi, 7 - 8)

Later with Gloucester at Dover, Edgar conducts a mock suicide on his father, pretending to help Gloucester fall over the cliff to his death. "Why I do trifle thus with his despair / Is done to cure it." (IV, vi, 33 - 34)

Edgar changes identity once again when he pretends to find Gloucester alive at the bottom of the cliff. "Ho, you, sir! Friend, hear you, sir? Speak! —." (IV, vi, 46) Gloucester asks Edgar, "Now, good sir, what are you?" (IV, vi, 216) And still keeping his identity from Gloucester, Edgar calls himself a man, not Poor Tom:

... made tame to fortune's blows,
Who, by the art of known and feeling sorrows,
Am pregnant to good pity. (IV, vi, 217 - 219)

Edgar has felt what it is to lose an inheritance, be sought for arrest under the false accusations laid out

by Edmund, to be out in the world living as a wild, crazed beggar. Now, he sees his father made blind, his aristocratic position lost; thanks to the same man, Edmund.

The scene then takes a sudden turn when Goneril's steward Oswald enters. France has been defeated. Oswald knows about Edmund's betrayal, that Gloucester is for France and supports Lear, and so he seeks to capture Gloucester for ransom, "A proclaimed prize; most happy!" (IV, vi, 222) Here, Edgar changes his identity yet again. He speaks as a West Country yokel, protecting Gloucester and challenging Oswald: "Ch'll (I will) not let go, (s)zir, without (f)vurther 'cagion (reason)." (IV, vi, 231)

They draw swords and Oswald is killed. As he lays dying, Oswald gives Edgar letters and asks him to deliver the letters, "To Edmund, Earl of Gloucester." (IV, vi, 245)

The letters are from Goneril. Edmund has seduced her with promises to help her become queen of England. Goneril's husband the Duke of Albany has refused to do this. Albany will fight to defend England against France but not to punish Lear and Cordelia. Edmund steps in to guarantee what Albany will not. And he hopes to be king as is proven when Goneril writes in one of her letters, "Let our reciprocal vows be / remembered." (IV, vi, 257 - 258) She also writes that Edmund must kill her husband now: "You have many opportunities to cut him / off." (IV, vi, 258 - 259) Edgar, with Gloucester in tow, vows to reach and warn Albany before Edmund can carry out Goneril's scheme.

V

In Act V, scene i, Edgar, still a peasant, passes on the letters he received from Oswald to the Duke of Albany, who is preparing for battle against France:

If you have victory, let the trumpet sound
For him that brought it. Wretched though I seem,
I can produce a champion that will prove
What is avouched there. (V, i, 42 - 45)

In Act V, scene ii, Edgar flees the battleground with Gloucester as France has lost and Lear and Cordelia have been captured by Edmund.

At the beginning of Act V, scene iii, Edmund secretly sends a captain to carry out death sentences for Lear and Cordelia before Albany can find out about them: "Come hither, captain, hark: / Take thou this note. Go, follow them to prison." (V, iii, 27 - 28) (The word "note" in these lines means a warrant for the death of Lear and Cordelia.)

Later, after having read the letters Edgar gave him earlier, Albany confronts Edmund, calling him a traitor. Edmund answers Albany's challenge:

What in the world he is
That names me traitor, villain-like he lies.
Call by the trumpet: he that dares approach,
On him, on you — who not? — I will maintain
My truth and honour firmly. (V, iii, 98 - 102)

Edmund orders the herald to sound the trumpet for any man to appear that will call Edmund traitor. And at the sound Edgar appears, armed.

At Albany's direction the herald demands to know who he is.

Edgar, as yet, does not reveal his true identity:

O know my name is lost,
By treason's tooth bare - gnawn and canker - bit;
Yet am I noble as the adversary
I come to cope withal. (V, iii, 119 - 122)

The 'adversary' is Edmund. Edgar demands that Edmund draw his sword and fight. He calls him a traitor to his father, to his half-brother and to the Duke of Albany. And that if he won't admit to being a traitor, Edgar will call him a liar and demand to face him in single combat.

Edmund draws his sword against Edgar but is mortally wounded in the fight. As Edmund lay dying Albany shows Edmund the letters and demands that he confess to being a traitor. Edmund concedes that the contents of the letter are true: "What you have charged me with, that have I done," (V, iii, 160) but he also cryptically refers to the death sentences he has ordered upon Lear and Cordelia: "And more, much more; the time will bring it out." (V, iii, 161)

Here, as Edmund is about to die, Edgar comes back to life. As his last dying wish, Edmund pleads for Edgar to reveal himself: "My name is Edgar and thy father's son." (V, iii, 167)

In fact, Edgar first revealed himself to Gloucester just before going to confront Edmund:

Never — O fault! —revealed myself unto him
Until some half-hour past, when I was armed,
(V, iii, 191 - 192)

Gloucester, full of emotion, dies upon hearing that it has been Edgar with him all along:

But his flawed heart,
Alack, too weak the conflict to support,
'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief,
Burst smilingly. (V, iii, 195 - 198)

Edmund's orders to kill Lear and Cordelia have resulted in Cordelia being hanged and Lear in grief, barely holding on to life himself. With the dead Cordelia in his arms Lear says, "And my poor fool is hanged. No, no, no life!" (V, iii, 304) Lear's grief does not last long, however, as he can go on no longer without his beloved Cordelia and dies: "Do you see this? Look on her: look, her lips, / Look there, look there!" (V, iii, 308 - 309)

Edgar, unlike Lear, has a chance to return, not just to who he was but to what he is supposed to become. In this he is helped by Albany. At first Albany speaks to both Kent and Edgar. In the wake of all the deaths, they are the ones who have lost the most, "Friends of my soul, you twain, / Rule in this realm and the gored state sustain." (V, iii, 318 - 319)

Kent, however, is tired, and with Lear dead his own reasons for going on have ended too. "I have a journey, sir, shortly to go; / My master calls me, I must not say no." (V, iii, 320 - 321)

Edgar is young. He can see a future no matter how bleak the current moment. He takes on the royal we when accepting the challenge of sovereign rule:

The weight of this sad time we must obey,
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
The oldest hath borne most; we that are young
Shall never see so much, nor live so long. (V, iii, 322 - 325)

Conclusion

The social, ethical and familial bonds found at the beginning of the play have been severed⁴. Edmund, as the duplicitous catalyst for all of the upheaval caused in the subplot, is a classic example of the Machiavel, one who manipulates others to ensure that he gets what he wants. And this kind of person is driven entirely by self-interest¹. Edgar lost his aristocratic identity thanks to his credulous nature and Edmund's abuse of his naivete.

Edgar was the son and heir of the Earl of Gloucester at the beginning of the play. Thanks to his half-brother he entered into a series of disguises and sought to escape from his identity as Edgar. However, by the end of the play he finds his status enhanced as a ruler of England in the final scene².

In his first disguise as the beggar Poor Tom, naked and pretending to madness, he was typical of many con men during this period². But in the hovel scene, Act III, scene iv, he also represents the many beggars, dressed in rags, living by their wits, ignored or shunned by society².

Later in Act IV identity takes off into numerous iterations. Edgar's Poor Tom becomes more disturbing when he allows his blinded father Gloucester to think that he's committing suicide by falling down one of the cliffs at Dover. Edgar then calls himself a man in order to pretend that he's a different person at the bottom of the cliff. Later, when he kills Oswald, he is a West Country yokel and he's a peasant when he flees with Gloucester after France's defeat and the arrest of Cordelia and Lear. In his duel with Edmund, he refuses to reveal himself until after he defeats his half-brother and Edmund lays dying.

It is at this moment, back as Edgar, that he can say, "The gods are just". (V, iii, 168) But what supports this statement other than his defeat of Edmund? Lear, Cordelia and Gloucester are or will soon be dead. What is "just" about all of the subplot's carnage and betrayal? Is it perhaps that now Edgar is back in control of himself? Is it the offer of kingship from Albany? "Rule in this realm and the gored state sustain." (V, iii, 319) Edmund, "unnatural", is dead by Edgar's hand. Things are back to a new enhanced normal. God is just...to Edgar.

Note

All quotes from the play come from the 1997 A&C Black Publishers Ltd edition of *The Arden Shakespeare, King Lear*, written by William Shakespeare and edited by RA Foakes².

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