

The Difficulty of Dying in *King Lear*

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MY TITLE MAY SEEM IRONIC. Clearly, death is not an unusual occurrence in *King Lear*. A list of characters who are dead by the end of the play would have to include Lear himself, all three of his daughters, one son-in-law, Oswald, Edmund, Gloucester, the “slave that was a-hanging” Cordelia (5.3.272), and the unnamed servant who mortally wounds Cornwall immediately before being himself killed by Regan. By the end of the play, almost all of the characters who matter are dead, dying, or, in the Fool’s case, have simply gone. The exceptions are Albany and Edgar, who take turns delivering the final lines in the Quarto and Folio texts, respectively. Surprisingly, however, among the characters who seek death, Goneril alone succeeds. Gloucester is not executed by Regan and Cornwall, who instead blind him, nor does he manage to dash himself against the rocks at the bottom of Dover Cliff. Lear is not destroyed during the storm, despite his cries for apocalypse, and later finds himself awoken from a sleep which he took to be death. Even Cordelia’s suicide, present in most if not all of the sources to which Shakespeare had access, is replaced by an extra-legal execution. The only character who does succeed in committing suicide, Goneril, is perhaps the most despicable. For every other character, death seems strangely unattainable. Most die, but not if they’re trying.

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While *Lear*, like “all tragedies” according to Lord Byron, ends “in death,” most deaths are strangely deferred. This unusual situation must be accounted for by any attempt to understand *King Lear* as a tragedy. Leo Tolstoy, in his famously perverse declaration of the superiority of the earlier, anonymous, and now mostly forgotten play *King Leir*, claims that Shakespeare’s adaptation violates all the conventions of tragedy accepted by his nineteenth-century admirers:

According to the laws laid down by those very critics who extol Shakespeare, the conditions of every tragedy are that the persons who appear should, as a result of their own characters, actions, and the natural movement of events, be brought into conditions in which, finding themselves in opposition to the world around them, they should struggle with it and in that struggle display their inherent qualities. (335–36)

More recent critics also attempt to distance themselves from nineteenth-century constructions of the tragic hero. Against the emphasis on the individual and his struggles, Naomi Conn Liebler and John Drakakis argue that “what is misrecognised as a flaw of ‘character’ is, in fact, a projection of something which has its roots, not in the inner psychological life of the protagonist, but in the larger domain of culture” (8). Tom McAlindon observes that as a result of this commitment to the cultural over the personal, “political criticism is largely if not wholly indifferent to the affective dimension of the plays, an indifference which seems least defensible in relation to the tragedies” (85). While a general suspicion of emotional affect informs an important vein of recent criticism, and is reflected in questions about genre, queries about Lear’s status as a tragic hero are neither new nor the preserve of any one critical school. Paul A. Cantor claims that “In the view of most critics, Lear is basically a pathetic old man, vain and foolish, rash in his judgment and incapable of controlling his emotions—and he is all these things from the very beginning of the play” (189). Even A. C. Bradley points out that by the end of the play, the audience has come to regard Lear “almost wholly as a sufferer, hardly at all as an agent” (280). In what follows, I will argue that Shakespeare’s play is an exceptional tragedy, not comprehensible by a traditional or existentialist reading. Specifically, I will be comparing theories of tragedy derived from the philosophies of Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, on the one hand, and Emmanuel Levinas, on the other, and will be arguing that the latter’s ideas provide a better framework within which to understand the tragedy of *King Lear*.

Existentialist readings leave something to be desired not only because they ignore the social but also because they would assert the mastery of the tragic hero over his fate. According to Sartre, the self as *cogito* contains a nothingness within itself, the origin of all nothingness: “Man is the being through whom nothingness comes to the world.” In order to serve as this being, man “must be able to put himself *outside* of being” (59).¹ This ability to detach oneself from Being is freedom itself and is central to the structure of time: “Freedom is the human being putting his past out of play by secreting his own nothingness” (Sartre 64). While Levinas apologizes for leaving out of *Existence and Existents* “any consideration of those philosophical works published, ... between 1940 and 1945” when he was incarcerated in a German prison camp (*Existence and Existents* 15), he seems to be responding to Sartre’s pre-war ideas or at least to the endemic Sartreanism of 1940s Paris in a section entitled, “Existence without Existents” (*Existence and Existents* 57–64). Here he argues that a true nihilation is impossible: “Let us imagine all beings, things and persons, reverting to nothingness.... Something would happen, if only night and the silence of nothingness.” Being is not extinguished by the destruction of individual beings; on the contrary, it merely becomes “impersonal, anonymous, yet indistinguishable” (*Existence and Existents* 57). Though one might attempt to escape Being through death—“Killing, like dying, seeks an escape from being, to go where freedom and negation operate”²—tragedy dramatizes the futility of such efforts. Levinas points toward Shakespeare’s use of spectres to show the return of presence in negation, even quoting Macbeth’s horror and baffled frustration at the appearance of Banquo’s ghost: “The time has been / That when the brains were out, the man would die, / And there an end” (*Macbeth* 3.4.77–79).³ Something similar is shown by Lear’s return to life and Gloucester’s failed suicide attempt. “This return of presence in negation,” writes Levinas, “this impossibility of escaping from an anonymous and uncorruptible existence constitutes the final depths of Shakespearean tragedy” (*Existence and Existents* 61).

- 1 Here and throughout this essay, italics within quotations indicate the author’s emphasis, never my own.
- 2 The original French reads “Tuer comme mourrir, c’est chercher une sortie de l’être, aller là où la liberté et la négation opèrent” (Levinas, *De l’Existence* 100). Alphonso Lingis’s translation renders this sentence as “To kill, like to die, is to seek an escape from being, to go where freedom and negation operate” (*Existence and Existents* 61).
- 3 All citations of Shakespeare’s works other than *King Lear* are to the *Riverside Shakespeare*.

Death does not constitute an escape from Being, since death can never be grasped and therefore is never present: “Death is never now” (*Time and the Other* 72). In his arguments regarding death, Levinas is most clearly responding to Heidegger, who considered death to be what is most one’s own or, to borrow one of Heidegger’s terms, one’s “ownmost.”⁴ It is the most radically individual of one’s possibilities, since no one else can suffer my death for me. Death is fundamental to the structure of *Dasein*: “Death does not just ‘belong’ to one’s own *Dasein* in an undifferentiated way; death *lays claim* to it as an *individual Dasein*” (Heidegger H263).⁵ Later in *Being and Time*, in a discussion of historicity, Heidegger claims that to grasp the finitude of one’s own existence is to free oneself from everything happenstantial and to choose one’s genuine and individual fate:

The more authentically *Dasein* resolves—and this means that in anticipating death it understands itself unambiguously in terms of its ownmost distinctive possibility—the more unequivocally does it choose and find the possibility of its existence, and the less does it do so by accident. (H384)

In Heidegger’s view, the tragic hero, who faces and grasps his own death, would be the most authentic of men.

It is against Heidegger’s philosophy of death and time that Levinas’s *Time and the Other* is directed. Here he describes death not as the most individual possibility but as the moment at which all of the self’s powers fail: “When death is here, I am no longer here, not just because I am nothingness, but because I am unable to grasp” (*Time and the Other* 72). In Levinas’s reading, it is logically impossible to make one’s death one’s own, even by anticipation: “Death is the impossibility of having a project” (*Time and the Other* 74). Levinas is therefore very critical of tragedy in the traditional sense which he identifies with Heidegger’s philosophy. Shakespeare’s plays furnish him with examples of tragic resolution, but also of its futility. Juliet’s cry that she retains “the power to die” is still a sort of mastery (*Time and the Other* 50).⁶ On the other hand, after a reading of the penultimate

4 This word is used by John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson to substitute for the German “eigenst” (Heidegger, *Index of English Expressions* s.v.).

5 Page numbers preceded by H refer to the marginal page-numbers in the Macquarrie–Robinson translation, which, in turn, represent the page numbering of the eighth German edition.

6 Richard A. Cohen translates Levinas’s “*Je garde le pouvoir de mourir*,” which presumably derives from a French translation of the play, as “I keep the power to die,” although the Shakespearean text is actually “myself have power to die” (*Romeo and Juliet* 3.5.242).

scene of *Macbeth*, he concludes that “Prior to death there is always a last chance; this is what heroes seize, not death” and proceeds to argue that “*Hamlet* is precisely a lengthy testimony to this impossibility of assuming death” (*Time and the Other* 73). *Hamlet* is Levinas’s exception to traditional tragedy, in that the title character comes to understand the difficulty of escaping Being in his famous soliloquy, where the possibility of “not to be” is replaced by the dreams which may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil.⁷ *King Lear*, however, also shows that the individual cannot escape Being by any act of will or mastery, not even suicide.

According to Levinas, the self ultimately becomes a trap: “The price paid for the existent’s position lies in the very fact that it cannot detach itself from itself” (*Time and the Other* 55). Where Hamlet merely meditates upon the “impossibility of assuming death,” the characters in *Lear* dramatize this impossibility when their attempts to die fail. “Away,” Gloucester cries in frustration at his failure to throw himself from the Cliffs of Dover, “and let me die” (4.6.48). In the next scene, Lear protests that “You do me wrong to take me out o’ the grave” (4.7.45). The peace of nothingness which G. Wilson Knight finds in the play is recalcitrant to the characters’ grasp (Knight 204). As Joseph Wittreich points out, in this play as in the Apocalypse, men seek death, but it flees from them (Wittreich 100–01; Rev. 9.6). Rather than asserting their power, the characters’ efforts to choose and appropriate their own deaths merely serve to emphasize their powerlessness. Stanley Cavell comments that Lear’s “rebirth” in Act 4 shows “that tragedy itself has become ineffective, outworn” (Cavell 111). The play retains its tragic affect despite frustrating models of tragedy based on the individual’s power to choose his or her own death. In seeking a traditional tragic resolution of their situations, the characters confront a deeper tragedy, the tragedy of absolute impotence, unable to control their own lives or escape their own selves.

In the first few pages of *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas argues that “My death is insignificant—unless I drag into my death the totality of being, as Macbeth wished, at the hour of his last combat” (*Otherwise* 3). To do so would be to make one’s death into a true nihilation. Like Macbeth, Lear tries to give his death importance by implicating the fate of the world in his own. Before we see him in the famous storm scene, he is described

7 The soliloquy to which Levinas refers is found in Act 3, Scene 1; Levinas’s comments on *Hamlet* are in *Time and the Other* 73, with an interesting annotation by Richard A. Cohen; my own article, on *Hamlet*, Levinas, and the New Historicism, appears in the *European Journal of English Studies* 4.2 (August 2000): 155–69.

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to Kent as calling for a deluge “that things might change, or cease” (3.1.7). Certainly Lear sees parallels between the external storm and the “tempest in my mind” (3.4.12). His views are echoed by Gloucester: “O ruined piece of nature, this great world / Shall so wear out to naught” (4.6.130–31). A great deal has been written about such apocalyptic imagery in *King Lear*, but not enough attention has been devoted to how much of it is spoken in the imperative. The parallel between the storms in the heavens and those in the minds of man, of which E. M. W. Tillyard considered Lear’s speeches to be “the greatest of all examples” (93),⁸ seems less interesting than the fact that the parallel is willed. Lear does not merely observe that the storm mirrors his own turmoil; on the contrary, he calls upon the storm to reflect it. He demands that the storm be worse, wanting the world itself to end when his world has become incoherent: “Blow winds and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!” (3.2.1), he commands, and a few lines later he orders the thunder to “Rumble thy bellyful! Spit fire, spout rain!” (3.2.14). When we meet Lear, alone except for the Fool, he is ignoring his companion’s suffering and calling for the thunder to “sing my white head” and

Strike flat the thick rotundity o’ the world,
Crack nature’s moulds, all germens spill at once
That make ingrateful man! (3.2.7–9)

Like Heidegger’s authentic *Dasein*, Lear is trying to choose his own death; moreover, he attempts to give his own death ontological significance by dragging the world down in his demise.

The suffering which constitutes Lear’s grandeur and grants his existence a certain tragic weight is largely voluntary. An alternative to his suffering always exists, as the Fool makes clear: “Good nuncle, in, and ask thy daughters blessing” (3.2.11–12). His desire to suffer is not only, as Harry Berger has argued, an effort to ratify the “monstrous ingratitude” of his daughters (35) but to ratify his own individual existence. Lear’s resolutely independent course of action is indeed heroic. “Solitude is,” according to Levinas, “not only a despair and an abandonment, but also a virility, a pride and a sovereignty” (*Time and the Other* 55). Lear dramatizes this pride when he opposes the tragic grandeur of suffering to the indignity of begging:

Return to her? And fifty men dismissed?
No! Rather I abjure all roofs and choose
To wage against the enmity o’ th’ air—
To be a comrade with the wolf and owl. (2.2.396–99)

8 He repeated his observation in *Shakespeare’s History Plays* (26).

In the Folio text, Lear calls upon the rains to “Pour on, I will endure” (3.4.18), expressing his heroism not by choosing his death but by choosing not to die. In either case, Lear’s action is tragic in the Heideggerian sense that Levinas finds in *Romeo and Juliet*; it is an attempt to make his existence meaningful by his own powers. By choosing, heroically, to embrace his demise, Lear moves ever closer to the horror which Levinas finds in other Shakespearean tragedies at the “return of presence in negation” (*Existence and Existents* 61). Both definitions of tragedy assume the solitude of the self, in either the heroic sense of being authentic or in the horrifying sense of being inescapable. By choosing to become a tragic hero, therefore, Lear moves toward the truly horrifying tragedy of inescapable being.

Rather than finding salvation in what Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield call, in a dismissive characterization of traditional tragic theory, “the sacredness, the redemptive power of the individual” (209), Levinas argues on the contrary that it is the self which must be escaped. Salvation, therefore, can only come from without, from the Other: “It can only come from elsewhere, while everything in the subject is here” (*Existence and Existents* 93). In choosing to be a tragic hero, Lear exiles himself from the Other, who alone offers an escape from Being. The storm scenes in which Lear calls for both his own death and an end to the world also bring him to the zenith of his habitual self-righteousness. Lear’s response to the storm is not helplessness, much less humility, but rage against the

servile ministers

That will with two pernicious daughters join
Your high-engendered battles ’gainst a head
So old and white as this. O ho! ’tis foul. (3.2.21–24)

In his famous speech calling for an apocalypse, Lear accuses others of “undivulged crimes,” in order to conclude with his own righteousness:

Hide thee, thou bloody hand,
Thou perjured, and thou simular of virtue
That art incestuous. Caitiff, to pieces shake,
That under covert and convenient seeming
Has practised on man’s life. Close pent-up guilts
Rive your concealing continents and cry
These dreadful summoners grace. I am a man
More sinned against than sinning. (3.2.53–59)

As long as he rages against the storm and the world, Lear does not acknowledge all the suffering he might have caused. He does not suffer what Levinas calls “a fear for all the violence and murder my existing might

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generate, in spite of its conscious and intentional innocence” (“Ethics as First Philosophy” 82). It is not while he is raging against the world but when he is suddenly calm that Lear recognizes the Fool and prays for the wretched. Similarly, he recognizes Cordelia only after “The great rage / ... is killed in him” (4.7.78–79). Even in his madness in Act 4, Lear’s solitude, that he has “No seconds,” becomes the basis of his partly ironic claim to royalty when confronted by Cordelia’s patrol:

I will die bravely, like a smug bridegroom.
What? I will be jovial. Come, come,
I am a king, my masters, know you that? (4.6.190, 194–96)

Lear’s discovery of his solitude and, as he thinks, mortal danger leads first to sorrow but then gives way to the possibility of making the experience of death meaningful and even bawdy by embracing it, “like a smug bridegroom.” Finally, his determination and power as an individual lead back to claims of kingship and dignity. The line of reasoning which Lear traces only leaves him more solitary, however, running away from an encounter. Lear’s attempts to assert his individuality, by calling for the destruction of the world, raging against the injustices of others, or promising to die like a smug bridegroom, reinforce his entrapment within Being, since they leave him more solitary. By attempting to become a tragic hero, choosing his own death, he isolates himself from those around him, thereby assuring that he experiences the “final depths of Shakespearean tragedy,” unable to escape from Being.

Gloucester twice attempts to choose his own death, but each time finds himself unable. Confronted by Regan and Cornwall, he echoes Macbeth in claiming that he is “tied to the stake and ... must stand the course” (3.7.53; *Macbeth* 5.7.1–2), before producing his own meaning out of the events, promising to “see / The winged vengeance overtake such children” (3.7.64–65). Although his situation is hopeless, he nevertheless finds hope by accepting it. Even if we do not follow Edward Pechter’s suggestion that Gloucester “has chosen the side he assumes will ultimately conquer” in the incipient civil war (Pechter 195), he remains an agent rather than a mere victim. One cannot help but admire Gloucester’s heroism. In the midst of terrible agonies, he looks forward to future revenge, maintains a sense of self as projection, and is therefore still an agent in spite of his helplessness. Gloucester’s stirringly courageous response is not, however, the last word. The stoicism with which he accepts his position and seeks to maintain his agency is eclipsed altogether by the sheer misery of his first line after the blinding, “All dark and comfortless” (3.7.84). Levinas pays particular

attention in *Time and the Other* to “the suffering lightly called physical.” This represents, in his mind, a greater challenge than “moral pain,” since “physical suffering in all its degrees entails the impossibility of detaching oneself from the instant of existence. It is the very irremissibility of being” (*Time and the Other* 70). Suffering, he argues, announces death, which cannot be grasped and in the face of which one becomes passive. “Where suffering attains its purity,” he argues, the authenticity and freedom by which Heidegger’s *Dasein* anticipates death turns into its opposite, passive sobbing (*Time and the Other* 72). In the physical misery of losing his eyes, Gloucester finds himself passive, unable to give his situation a meaning or himself a heroic posture. Had Cornwall accepted Regan’s suggestion to “Hang him instantly!” (3.7.4), he could have denounced Lear’s daughters from the scaffold. He could, in other words, have attained the status of a tragic hero appropriating his death, as indeed he briefly does in this scene. The death he anticipates and for which he prepares is, however, denied him. Instead of individuating himself by his authentic projection toward death as his “ownmost” possibility, he finds himself powerless, unable even to die. His world has become “All dark and comfortless” indeed.

This moment of suffering does not, however, permanently dissuade Gloucester from attempts to appropriate his own death. He recovers his courage by the next scene in which he appears. Perhaps, as Bradley observes, the choice of Dover as a place of suicide is as arbitrary as it is impractical,⁹ but Gloucester embarks upon his journey with determination, hiring Tom as his guide. Even after the blinding, Gloucester succeeds in approaching the world as an agent, even a paying customer. He has enough mastery over his condition to offer philosophical observations about it, such as the famous aphorism, “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, / They kill us for their sport” (4.1.38–39). However, Gloucester’s renewed sense of stoicism immediately follows Edgar’s declaration of a similar power over his own fate, in a juxtaposition which serves to criticize both. Edgar congratulates himself on not having been destroyed and therefore having grown stronger, despising the air since he “Owes nothing to thy blasts” (4.1.9), and making a statement of hope, since he has already been “blown unto the worst” (4.1.8) and risen above it. Immediately following this statement of the power of the individual over fate, the blind Gloucester enters, as if summoned to crush such pretensions. Edgar’s

9 “Why in the world should Gloucester, when expelled from his castle, wander painfully all the way to Dover simply in order to destroy himself?” (Bradley 257).

immediately abandoned stoicism seems in turn designed to ironize Gloucester's renewed sense of his ability to choose his death.

Gloucester's thwarted suicide provides the best example in the play of the failure of the tragic theme of existentialism, the hero's authentic projection toward his own death. Immediately before his suicide attempt, Gloucester offers the gods an explanation for his actions:

This world I do renounce and in your sights
Shake patiently my great affliction off.
If I could bear it longer and not fall
To quarrel with your great opposeless wills,
My snuff and loathed part of nature should
Burn itself out. (4.6.35–40)

Jan Kott, in his famous treatment of this scene, claims that "Gloucester's suicide has a meaning only if the gods exist" (149). More specifically, his suicide has a meaning only if Gloucester can, by committing suicide, compel the attention of the gods. Kott's formula, like Gloucester's prayer, makes the gods into witnesses to a meaning which Gloucester attempts to generate. Juliet may claim the power to die, but Gloucester loses even this. "'Twas yet some comfort," he laments, "When misery could beguile the tyrant's rage / And frustrate his proud will" (4.6.62–64).

In his description of *anxiété*, Sartre offers the example of a man on the edge of a cliff. While he may be afraid of the height, he suffers anguish¹⁰ at the thought that he could always throw himself off, or at least not pay attention and slip. Anguish is a fear of one's own possibilities: "[I]t is in anguish that man gets the consciousness of his freedom" (Sartre 65). In fact, one's own freedom to choose a course of action may become so terrifying that it causes one to jump, since, as Sartre adds parenthetically, "suicide would cause anguish to cease" (69). In Gloucester's case, however, even a suicide attempt cannot end the possibility that he might, in the future, perform some act such as quarrelling with the gods. Even more than being condemned to be free, he is condemned simply to be. Levinas contradicts Sartre as well as Heidegger when he suggests that anxiety is not "the experience of nothingness," but "on the contrary—if by death one means nothingness—the fact that it is impossible to die" (*Time and the Other* 51). For Gloucester, there is no exit at all.

Edgar twice claims to be saving his father from despair (4.6.62–64; 5.3.190), and in the play as a whole, despair is generally linked with suicide.

10 Hazel E. Barnes translates "*anxiété*" as "anguish" in the edition of *Being and Nothingness* which I am following here.

The Elizabethan period did not merely define despair as a sort of synonym for suicidal depression, however. On the contrary, despair was also understood in the period theologically, as a temptation. “Extreme dread,” John Calvin warns, “tends to make us shun God while he is calling us to himself by repentance” (3.3.15). Despair is a risk of recognizing our sin, Calvin argues, but only to “the reprobate.” This link between sinfulness and despair is explained, in part, by a declaration which he makes elsewhere in the *Institutes*: “[I]f we are to seek our worthiness from ourselves, it is all over with us; only despair and fatal ruin await us” (Calvin 4.17.41). A works-based theology leads only to despair (Calvin 3.8.3), since it implies seeking salvation by virtue of one’s own (all too unworthy) actions. In this argument, Calvin is anticipated by Martin Luther, who concludes *On the Bondage of the Will* with a note of gratitude that his salvation is not in his own hands: “But now that God has taken my salvation out of the control of my own will, and put it under the control of His, and promised to save me, not according to my working or running, but according to His own grace and mercy, I have the comfortable certainty that He is faithful and will not lie to me” (314).

The theological meaning of despair was not merely available to Shakespeare but actually deployed by him in a number of his plays. Horatio, obviously fearing suicide, worries that the ghost might put “toys of desperation” into Hamlet’s mind (*Hamlet* 1.4.75). In wooing Anne, Richard explains the seriousness of suicide as despair and therefore self-accusation (*Richard 3* 1.2.85). Later in the same play, “Despair and die” is a curse that is repeated, almost liturgically, over the sleeping body of Richard before the battle of Bosworth Field (*Richard 3* 5.3.118 ff.), and Macduff urges Macbeth to “Despair thy charm” (*Macbeth* 5.8.13). In the first instance at least, despair should be understood as a curse in addition to death, by which the dead person is condemned. Occasionally, Shakespeare even plays on the theological meaning, as when he structures Sonnet 144 by an opposition between two spirits, who tempt toward “comfort and despair.”

Douglas Cole, in an essay on Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, quotes the Homilies, Lancelot Andrewes, John Donne, and others on the proximity of despair and presumption (218). By attempting suicide, Gloucester attempts to impose himself on the gods, while feeling that his position is beyond their aid. In neither despair nor presumption is one’s reliance on the Other—God or the other man—sufficiently recognized. As Goneril makes her final and fatal exit, Albany describes her as “desperate” (5.3.159); shortly thereafter, Kent tells Lear that she and Regan “have foredone themselves / And desperately are dead” (5.3.289–90). Kent is wrong, since Goneril actu-

ally poisoned Regan, but his comment nevertheless demonstrates the association between desperation and suicide. Significantly, Goneril's suicide is immediately anticipated by her unwillingness to submit herself to the judgement of others: "Say if I do, the laws are mine, not thine. / Who can arraign me for't?" (5.3.156–57). Goneril's suicide seems, like Gloucester's, to constitute a further isolation, as she turns inwards to herself rather than outwards to the Other. Only the most evil character, the character most indifferent to others, succeeds in choosing her death.

Cordelia, on the other hand, never becomes desperate, though Edmund's orders are "To lay the blame upon her own despair, / That she fordid herself" (5.3.252–53). R. W. Chambers points out that in not allowing Cordelia to commit suicide, Shakespeare makes an innovation which, while anticipated by medieval versions of the story, breaks with all the sources likely to have been available to him and, therefore, he "*does* depart from historical fact, as he had received it" (21). The altered death of Cordelia would have been, if not quite as surprising to the audience as Gloucester's failed leap from the cliff, a similar frustration of an expected suicide. Shakespeare seems, at least in Chambers's reading, intent on saving Cordelia from Edmund's slander: "In our days," Chambers writes in November 1939, "the message has been smuggled out of Concentration Camps: 'You will be told that I committed suicide: it will not be true.' The sender of the message has wished to save his reputation from what he feels would be a slur upon it.... Shakespeare feels this about Cordelia" (22–23). The play seems to meditate upon the question of suicide and, therefore, on the heroic subject's ability to choose death. In Shakespeare's play, unlike most of its predecessors, death is not something which is chosen, at least not by any of the characters which Shakespeare, like Edgar, wished to save from despair.

There is, however, an understanding of death in the play other than as something grasped or chosen authentically by the tragic hero. Oswald's final and characteristically ignoble words—"O untimely death, death!" (4.6.246)—dramatize the obvious fact that death can come to the characters, rather than being chosen by them. Better characters ascribe the arrival of death to their gods, treating it as a relationship to what is radically Other. Praying for death, as Gloucester does after his suicide attempt, at least implies a relationship with something outside oneself:

You ever gentle gods, take my breath from me;
Let not my worser spirit tempt me again
To die before you please. (4.6.213–15)

By asking for the gods to kill him, Gloucester is still trying to avoid his future possibilities, but not through his own will. He recognizes, in other words, limits to his own projection. “Men must endure,” says Edgar to Gloucester, “Their going hence even as their coming hither” (5.2.9–10). Kent abdicates the throne and withdraws from the play’s world with his last line, but he does so in response to a summons: “I have a journey, sir, shortly to go; / My master calls me, I must not say no” (5.3.320–21). Lear’s realization that he is still alive should, I think, be spoken in a tone of horror: “You do me wrong to take me out o’ the grave” (4.7.45). His return to the world of the living represents the terrifying impossibility of dying. Within a few lines, however, his thoughts have shifted from despair over his own ability to die to recognition of another and to death as coming from without: “I pray weep not. / If you have poison for me, I will drink it” (4.7.71–72). Even Edmund, after a career of bold gambles and seized opportunities, surrenders his accomplishments in the face of death: “’Tis past and so am I” (5.3.162). Having abandoned his accomplishments and his future, he is able to recognize others, to be moved by Edgar’s speech (5.3.198), acknowledge the love which Goneril and Regan felt for him (5.3.238), and, most startlingly of all, send a reprieve for Lear and Cordelia, albeit too late (5.3.241–44). Death is not always seized, as by a tragic hero. Normally, it is simply accepted, as coming from outside the self. This is the beginning, in Edmund’s case, of recognizing the Other, also external to the self.

In fact, there is a general pattern in the play, by which characters recognize others immediately after facing the loss of their own powers. Gloucester recognizes his sin toward Edgar immediately after being blinded: “O my follies! Then Edgar was abused? / Kind gods, forgive me that and prosper him” (3.7.90–91). Not only does this show a renewed concern with somebody else, but it places such concern in the context of guilt about his own “follies.” This is one of the few times in the play that the gods are prayed to for somebody else’s sake and not in order to claim a transcendent sanction for one’s own self-interest.¹¹ Gloucester is also somewhat more concerned with others after his second suicide attempt, as well, seeing the world’s injustice “feelingly” (4.6.145). As already mentioned, Lear recognizes Cordelia upon awakening from a sleep which he took to be death. This is not, however, to claim that Lear recognizes the suffering of others out of sympathy, as Dollimore argues: “He has ignored

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11 I have argued elsewhere that characters habitually use religion in such a way (Lawrence *passim*).

[poverty] not through callous indifference but simply *because he has not experienced it*" (191). On the contrary, the chronology of Lear's famous prayer apostrophized to the wretched of the earth shows that Lear is driven to divest himself and expose himself "to feel what wretches feel" (3.4.34), only after he recognizes the suffering of the "poor naked wretches ... / That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm" (3.4.28–29). Lear recognizes the Fool in the storm after he has lost everything and failed to control the elements. Rather than understanding others by projecting his own condition onto them, Lear recognizes his own condition by first recognizing that condition in another, touchingly: "Come on, my boy. How dost my boy? Art cold? / I am cold myself" (3.2.68–69). Characters in the play do not recognize each other by projecting their own situations onto one another. On the contrary, such efforts merely lead to mis-recognition, as when Lear asks Poor Tom, "Didst thou give all to thy two daughters?" (3.4.48). Instead, the characters recognize each other only when they treat each other as Others and stop projecting.

In the play, as in Levinas's philosophy, the impossibility of nothingness "deprives suicide, which is the final mastery one can have over being, of its function of mastery" (*Time and the Other* 50). In seeking to become heroes, facing their deaths as their ownmost possibilities, the characters succeed in making themselves tragically helpless rather than heroic. After failing in their attempts to escape Being on their own, through suicide, the characters then turn to each other. This movement from tragic heroism to its even more tragic failure and on to recognition of others is a process, but as Gloucester's repeated attempts to end himself show, the process is not linear nor does it yield permanent results. Though Lear recognizes the Fool during the storm scene, he nevertheless reverts to metaphysical speculations, harangues against his daughters, and sermons on the injustice of the world, before recognizing Cordelia. The end of the final scene is particularly ambiguous, with efforts by the characters to assert themselves punctuated by moments of helplessness. Lear echoes the apocalypticism of the Old Testament prophets at his entrance: "Howl, howl, howl, howl!" (5.3.255; *Milward* 24–25; *Jeremiah* 25.34). The other characters on the stage recognize this as an ambiguous apocalypse. "Is this the promised end?" asks Kent, while Albany, like one of the earlier incarnations of Lear, calls for finality: "Fall and cease" (5.3.261–62). By asking for a mirror, Lear grasps at a last chance to show that Cordelia is still alive. Kent tries to impose himself on the scene of misery, asking Lear to recognize him. Lear's concentration flickers, and he accuses those who have interrupted his thoughts of causing Cordelia's death, as if his

concentrated will was sufficient to keep her alive, or at least to imagine her alive. He returns to her within three lines, however, speaking to her familiarly, then drifting off into referring to her in the third person. His description of killing her executioner (5.3.272) leads him to a less than humble description of his youthful prowess, when he “with my good biting falchion / ... would have made him skip” (5.3.274–75). Lear may have killed to defend Cordelia, but his recollection of the action seems boastful, if not ludicrous. Immediately after these lines, however, Lear recognizes his age and weakness before acknowledging Kent: “I am old now / And these same crosses spoil me. Who are you?” (5.3.275–76). His engagement with those around him wavers yet again, and Albany declares that “vain it is / That we present us to him” (5.3.291–92), before laying down a new political order and promising to divide punishments and rewards. This speech is in turn interrupted by Lear, crying out against the death of Cordelia and briefly recognizing that she is dead regardless of what he does. Lear dies, in the Folio and most conflated texts, concentrating all his energies on the Other, looking to Cordelia or, at least, outwards: “Do you see this? Look on her: look, her lips, / Look there, look there!” (5.3.309–10). According to the stage direction in the Folio, this is the moment of Lear’s death. But the Quarto text has no such stage direction and assigns him a further line, “Break, I prithee, break.” Does Lear die concentrating entirely upon the Other or does he seek his death in calling on his own heart to break? If we follow Steven Urkowitz in believing that the Folio text represents authorial revisions (148–49), it would seem that Shakespeare meditated on this very question and decided that he would save Lear, like Cordelia, from the charge of having chosen his death. A similar question could be asked regarding Kent, to whom this line is transferred in the Folio text. If he also wishes to kill himself, his suicide is avoided not by way of a meta-theatrical trick, like Gloucester’s, or an alteration of the source text, like Cordelia’s, but simply by ending the play before he has a chance. While we do know that “his strings of life / Began to crack” earlier (5.3.215–16), and while he clearly accepts the summons to die with his last lines, the practicalities of how he is to answer it are left opaque, and he is not even allowed the initiative to obey.

The characters in *King Lear* are unable to escape Being by their own efforts. If the freedom of the tragic hero is central to tragic theory, then the play is a very unusual tragedy indeed. Shakespeare’s play can be understood as a meditation upon the limits and ethics of freedom, and therefore of the tragic genre, in which tragic heroism is rejected in favour of tragic helplessness, the tragedy of being. The characters find peace not

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in choosing death but in recognizing others. *Lear* is not an existential tragedy, illustrating the authenticity of individuals, any more than it is a nineteenth-century tragedy that displays the “inherent qualities” of the characters. Rather, it is an ethical tragedy, about the need to acknowledge the Other.

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