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Richard Gunderman
Indiana University

The Birth of Compassion: Lear on the Heath

Abstract

This article explores the transformative power of compassion as depicted in Shakespeare's King Lear, focusing on Lear's journey from arrogance and power to humility and empathy. Centered on Act 3, Scene 4—where Lear stands exposed on the heath amidst a storm—the analysis shows how suffering leads Lear to recognize his shared humanity with "unaccommodated man." The piece argues that through witnessing Lear's transformation, readers and students alike can cultivate deeper compassion and fellow-feeling. By examining the symbolic and literal barrenness of the heath, the article highlights how Shakespeare uses landscape and adversity to strip Lear of pretenses, bringing him closer to a universal human vulnerability. Ultimately, the article suggests that such literary encounters can serve as moral education, fostering compassion as a foundation for peace and justice in both personal and social contexts.

Keywords:
Compassion, King Lear, Transformation, Human Vulnerability, Moral Education

Compassion cannot be a costume we don or an act we put on. Instead, it must come from within, our actions expressing genuinely peaceful thoughts and feelings. As such, each of us bears responsibility to cultivate compassion within ourselves and to extend it to others. One of the best means of cultivating such a compassionate presence is through the encounter with great works of history, art, philosophy, and literature, especially those that capture the transformation of anger into acceptance, fear into forgiveness, and conflict into peace.

One of the greatest depictions of such a transformation in world literature, at least in my experience, is found in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. At the beginning of the play, Lear is a man whose word is law. Accustomed to getting his way, he is quick to resort to violence. He is also arrogant and acts both rashly and irresponsibly, bending others to his will through sheer power. Yet by the end of the play, he has been transformed by the suffering he has both witnessed and endured into a different person, one capable of compassion for the travails of others. He has been liberally educated – his fellow feeling has been liberated through his encounter with "unaccommodated man."

Similar though perhaps not so dramatic transformations can take place in students. Having vicariously experienced what Lear has been through, they too can discover the true extent of their compassion for the plight of others. When we recognize that we are all cast from the same human alloy, all cut from the same human cloth, intolerance, hatred, and violence become unnatural responses, not the way anyone would treat a brother or sister. In composing *King Lear*, Shakespeare has bestowed upon us a precious gift. When conditions are right, immersion in this tale, whether on the page or the stage, can awaken in us the realization that peace and justice in the world begin with compassion in each human heart.

Let us turn to the text itself. To begin with, we must understand what is meant by heath. A heath consists of open, rather level land that is poor for raising crops. It usually features scrubby vegetation and offers no cover in the way of trees or even bushes. It is also relatively infertile, with acidic and sandy soil, and typically found in a dry climate, especially so in summer. In many cases, heaths are man-made, in the sense that natural woodland and forest vegetation have been cleared by grazing or burning. As this account implies, a heath is no place to find oneself in a raging thunderstorm.

In Act 3, scene 4 of *King Lear*, the very center of perhaps Shakespeare's greatest tragedy, Lear and his companions find themselves on just such terrain – a heath – amid just such a maelstrom. Lear himself, who has transferred his kingdom to his daughters Goneril and Regan, has been turned out of their houses and now rages at their ingratitude, lack of respect, and cold hearts. With Lear is Kent, his loyal advisor, who has been forced to disguise himself because Lear, in a fit of fury, has banished him on pain of death from the kingdom for speaking truly. Also with him is the king's fool, who like Kent speaks truth to the erstwhile king in a way no one else can.

During this scene, they encounter Gloucester, a loyal lord who has been betrayed by his bastard son, Edmund, as well as Edgar, Gloucester's legitimate son, who has been falsely implicated by Edmund in a plot to betray his father and is now disguised as Poor Tom o' Bedlam, a homeless man. Bedlam refers to Bethlehem Hospital, a notorious asylum for the mad founded in the 13th century just outside the city walls of London.

To repeat, Lear and his companions find themselves on the heath in the midst of a terrible tempest. Lear is a rare man, a king, whose word has been treated as law and who has, up to this point, engaged in very little self-examination. With no one to gainsay him, he has not given much thought to himself or the place of man in the larger scheme of things. But the tables have now turned. He is no longer king, and he is beginning to find himself confronted with some unaccustomed questions.

Of what moment are the title of king, the raiment of a sovereign, or royal edicts in such a place as this? Despite a lifetime of pomp, the lashing winds do not spare him, the pouring rain does not swerve to avoid him, and thunder and lightning do not appear and disappear at his word. No, they assail him with the same force they would the lowest commoner, or even a beast. Lear and his men find themselves in a situation where the conventions of human society no longer

obtain, where all men are fundamentally equal. Along this journey, he has lost much in the way of wealth, power, and honor, but he has gained something as well – the possibility of wisdom and compassion.

The scene opens with the ever-loyal Kent, always looking out for the king's best interests in a way the sovereign himself cannot, urging Lear to enter a hovel that offers shelter from the storm. "The tyranny of the night's too rough for nature to endure," he warns. Immediately we are presented with a stark contrast between convention and nature. It is in the realm of human affairs that the play's two great tyrannies have taken place – Lear's daughters throwing him out of their houses and Gloucester betrayed by his bastard son. Yet Kent refers to a meteorological tyranny, the storm itself, which knows nothing of such seemingly manmade boundaries. The irony is biting – what good will Lear's life of unchallenged rule, with its stark distinctions between the mandatory and the forbidden, do him here?

Lear, however, wishes to be left alone. To him, the storm seems nothing in comparison with the great wrong he has suffered at his ungrateful daughters' hands. There is a tempest raging around him, but there is also a tempest churning away in his mind, one on which he cannot bear to loosen his grip. His lust for vengeance is so great that he refuses to be distracted by Kent's counsel to enter a warmer, drier place, shielded from the storm. He wants to carry on roiling in his rage. And yet he recognizes the absurdity of his stance, crying out, "O, that way madness lies; let me shun that; no more of that." Finally, he consents and moves to enter the hovel.

But then his eyes fall upon the fool, and for the first time in the drama, throughout which he has seen events from only his own regal point of view, he begins to think of someone other than himself. To the fool he says, "In, boy; you first. You houseless poverty – nay, get thee in. I'll pray, and then I'll sleep." Before Lear can think of sleep, he must first pray. And for what will he pray? Vengeance upon his foes? The restoration of his crown? The end of his sufferings? No, instead he prays for the

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

For the first time in a long time, perhaps his entire life, Lear begins to look at life from the vantage point of the poorest of his subjects, people who lack shelter, food, and clothing, the protections and comforts the king has always taken for granted. Seeing the storm from their point of view, he begins to feel compassion for them, and this fellow feeling translates into action. He sends the fool ahead of himself into the shelter. He begins to realize that he has always thought too

much of himself, of what matters to a king, and too little of what matters to a man, perhaps even to the point that he has practically ceased to see himself as human.

Now Lear wishes to put aside his pride, to feel what wretches feel, that he might share with them the excess he enjoys beyond what is strictly necessary to live. In so doing, he would show the heavens more just, a remarkable phrase that might suggest that he will show the godly realm to be fairer than he has been, that he will show himself more compassionate than pitiless nature, or that he will finally align his conduct with the dictates of the divine.

Out of the hovel staggers Poor Tom, shouting "Fathom and a half, fathom and a half!" Presumably, a ship (perhaps Lear, or the whole state of Britain?) is in danger of running aground. The fool warns them not to enter, mistaking Tom for a spirit. In at least one sense this is apt, for there is something profoundly spiritual about Edgar. An innocent who has failed to suspect another's treachery, he has been compelled to renounce nearly all that man's artifice has to offer – home, clothing, kitchen, and even his very name and biography. When Kent demands that he come forth, Poor Tom shouts that he is being pursued by a foul fiend.

Lear, on whom wisdom has only just begun to dawn, is still partially entrapped by his overweening concern, asking, "Hast thou given all to thy two daughters? And art thou come to this?" When Lear sees someone in torment, he supposes they have suffered the same wrong as he. Yet Tom responds, "Who gives anything to poor Tom?" In other words, what have I, or have I ever had, to give? Do you not see what I am? But Lear, still obsessed almost entirely with his own wounds, can only assume, "What, have his daughters brought him to this pass? Couldst thou save nothing? Didst thou give them all?"

To the contrary, Tom shares a tale of even more terrible woe, having been chased by the foul fiend through fire and flame, driven to the brink of suicide even, but in his density all Lear can hear are the cries of a man betrayed by his daughters. Tom cries, "Tom's a-cold! Do poor Tom some charity, whom the foul fiend vexes."

Lear has been betrayed by his daughters, but Poor Tom, the innocent Edgar, has been attacked by the devil himself, suggesting that there are autonomous forces of evil in the world, pursuing the corruption of man. It is Tom, not Lear, who poses an essential question that Lear himself must consider – are good and evil parts of creation, independent of human beings, or are they merely the product of human volition? Everyone knows that heaths and storms are natural, but what about virtue and vice? Are they mere human conventions, or in distinguishing between the two, do we recognize a distinction intrinsic to reality itself?

Kent, who acts as one of Lear's guides to reality, tells him, "He hath no daughters, sir." Lear is incensed, crying "Nothing could have subdued nature to such a lowness but his unkind daughters." Lear is so curved in on himself, so preoccupied with his own wounded pride, that his tragedy at times takes on a comical cast. He wonders if he should punish his own flesh as poor, naked Tom is doing, prompting Tom to observe that this is the same flesh on flesh that

spawned Lear's daughters in the first place. Are we, seemingly like Tom, mere animals, composed of little more than tissue, whose innate drives impel us to eat and copulate? Or are we something more?

The fool observes, "This cold night will burn us all to fools and madmen." Can humanity withstand such a severe existential onslaught?

Edgar responds with a miniature rendition of the laws of God, the Ten Commandments:

> Take heed o' the fiend; obey thy parents;
> keep thy word justly; swear not; commit not with
> man's sworn spouse; set not thy sweet heart on proud
> array. Tom's a-cold.

Edgar has neither given offence nor suspected in others the propensity to do so. He has lived according to the laws of God and man. He has respected the dividing line between good and evil, obeyed his father, kept his word, eschewed swearing and adultery, and shunned pride. Yet what has become of him? He has lost everything, including his own identity, which were it recognized by others, would be the death of him. He has lived blamelessly but been transformed into Poor Tom, and Tom's a-cold.

Does nature take no account of human goodness? Is the entire distinction between good and evil no more than a human fabrication, with no basis in reality? Tom wonders as much, and so too must Lear, who has led a life perched atop society's edifice.

Lear presses Tom to tell him who he has been. Tom reports that he was a serving man in a proud household, yet he "did the act of darkness to serve his mistress's heart." He "swore as many oaths as I spake words, and broke them in the sweet face of heaven," loved wine and dice, and proved himself "false of heart, light of ear, bloody of hands." Having presumably learned his lesson, Tom advises his companions to "Let not the creaking of shoes nor the rustling of silks betray thy poor heart to woman: keep thy foot out of brothels, thy hand out of plackets, thy pen from lenders' books, and defy the foul fiend." Tom is speaking for Edgar here, and he represents a man who has not given up the faith. Having stumbled down the wrong path, he advises others to stick to the straight and narrow.

Lear answers,

> Why, thou wert better in thy grave than to answer
> with thy uncovered body this extremity of the skies.
> Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou
> lowest the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep
> no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! here's three on 's
> are sophisticated! Thou art the thing itself:
> unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare
> forked animal as thou art. Off, off you lendings!
> come unbutton here.

Lear begins tearing off his clothes. Why? Because he has glimpsed for the first time that he, too is, at base, the same thing, an unaccommodated man, and he wishes to see himself and become what he really is, for the first time joining another bare human being. What is a man, once all the trappings of civilization have been removed? Is it only in beholding such an utterly naked creature that we truly glimpse the human?

Or is a human being something more along the lines of what Aristotle called a political or social animal – namely, one that is not and cannot become itself except through family and community? To be sure, our clothes are mere lendings, always shaped by the particular culture in which we live and potentially out of place the moment we find ourselves in another place and time. Yet perhaps an utterly unadorned specimen of Homo sapiens is barely human at all. We require something more than what nature provides other animals – something along the lines of parents, teachers, and friends, and food, clothing, and shelter in order to become the creatures we are meant to be. Tom, the very least of these his brothers, has revealed what it means to be human, and the newly enlightened Lear leaps aboard.

The throne, the court, and the bureaucracy have been Lear's bailiwick for as long as he can remember. And yet, he has never really felt one with his people, a state of alienation that has hidden from him his appropriate orientation in life. He could make laws and punish those who fail to obey, but laws made by a half-blind man cannot properly promote families and communities, ensure that children are well raised, or encourage people to share their best with one another. How many times has Lear refused not only to hear the truth but also to allow its messenger to live? Man is indeed a forked – that is, two-legged – animal, but Lear is discovering that what matters most is not our physiognomy but the narratives that shape us. Does evil triumph over good? Is the good worth fighting for, even so? To what degree do the earthly and heavenly realms respect the same goods and evils?

Upon the scene comes Gloucester, who, having learned that all persons should not be trusted, asks the men of the party to identify themselves. Edgar, his own disguised son, launches into a description of Poor Tom's miserable existence, eating "the swimming frog, the toad, the tadpole," "cow dung" for salads, and "the old rat and the ditch-dog," suffering whippings "from tithing to tithing," and enduring both punishment in the stocks and imprisonment. His food is not cooked, he is punished even in his giving, and his very life is little more than a miserable punishment.

Gloucester asks Lear, "Hath your grace no better company?" regretfully observing that the fallen king finds himself among the absolute lowest dregs of humanity. If anyone has reason to curse his existence, it is Poor Tom, who seems to his unseeing father to have nothing to offer but the plea that "Poor Tom's a-cold."

Gloucester bids Lear to go in with him. He recognizes that his first duty is still to the erstwhile king, not his daughter's "hard commands" to bar their doors and let this "tyrannous" night take hold of him. Risking his own life, he chooses to seek Lear out and bring him to a place where both fire and food are ready. Again, the word tyrannous heightens the irony. The heath, the storm, and

the cold seem hell-bent against the king, determined to deprive him of shelter, comfort, and perhaps even life itself. Yet who would deem the weather just or unjust, obedient or rebellious? These are human categories that apply to the likes of Lear's daughters, who have turned out their father and his paltry retinue into this dangerous night. They, the ungrateful daughters, are the ones acting tyrannously.

Yet Lear will not go, at least not yet. Instead, he demands, "First let me talk to this philosopher," referring to Poor Tom. "What," he asks, perhaps echoing Aristophanes' comic play The Clouds, "is the cause of thunder?" In other words, where does thunder, and by extension, this storm, come from? Is it a mere stage in the unfolding of nature's course that takes no notice of man and human affairs, or has it been sent by the heavenly realm as punishment for wrongs done? Lear would, if he could, interrogate the storm to learn if it, like the whirlwind in the Book of Job, has something to say.

Yet since the booming thunder is otherwise mute, Lear turns to a fellow human being who has endured all the suffering that life can mete out, to see what he makes of thunder. If the Greek tragedian Aeschylus was right, and it is from suffering that wisdom comes, then no one could lay higher claim to the title of philosopher than Poor Tom, for no one has suffered more. Lear even calls him "learned Theban," echoing the title of one of Aeschylus' most famous tragedies. To speak with Tom is what Lear most desires, even if it means bearing yet more of the storm's terrible fury.

Kent asks Gloucester to importune the king again to accompany him, but Gloucester cannot blame him. Lear's own daughters would welcome his death. Like the king, Gloucester senses that he himself is almost mad, recalling what he has suffered. He thinks of his son, whom he loved as much as any father, yet who now has become an outlaw from his own blood that seeks his very life. "The grief," says Gloucester, "hath crazed my wits." Of course, unseeing Gloucester is wrong about this. It is not his blameless son Edgar but his bastard son Edmund who has truly betrayed him.

Yet again Lear begs the "noble philosopher" to accompany him, to which Poor Tom can only respond, "Tom's a-cold." Lear will go, but only with him, declaring "I will keep still with my philosopher." When Gloucester and Kent agree, Lear bids Tom, "Come, good Athenian." Yet they must proceed in silence, for fear of detection. The king and his noblest advisors must move quietly in the darkness, mindful of the fact that the law, the police, and the prisons have swung to the other side. They, though in some crucial respects the same men they have always been, now find themselves on the side of the hunted.

The scene's last words are Poor Tom's:

> Child Rowland to the dark tower came,
> His word was still, "Fie, foh, and fum,
> I smell the blood of a British man."

Rowland was one of the knight-heroes of the Charlemagne legends, at this point in Tom's story just setting out to earn his knighthood. It is the blood of

a British man he smells, but what does it mean to be British? Does a British citizen enjoy certain rights that the law must respect? Does he have a right to meet his accuser, to present his case, to be adjudicated fairly, and to appeal when injustice has been done? Or, as in the ancient fairy tale "Jack and the Beanstalk," is a British man nothing more than a morsel to be consumed by Leviathan, a mere animal of prey most notable for its aroma and edibility?

Like the Cyclops of the Odyssey, who invites Odysseus and his men to share a meal in which he means to make them the main course, is the state of Britain nothing more than a machine that does the bidding of whatever tyrant happens to be sitting at the controls on its throne? Will Lear, like Jack, manage to escape the terrible giant he has loosed upon his erstwhile kingdom?

In one sense, Lear has suffered grave injuries, culminating in his utter vulnerability to the storm on the heath. Yet he has also gained something of great worth – the opportunity to behold unaccommodated man. In so doing, he begins to recognize that the moment of events cannot be weighed strictly by the fact that they happen to him. What happens to Lear is not necessarily what matters most, nor is he necessarily what matters most, at least to the extent that others sometimes endure more than he. His eyes are opened, and he begins to appreciate the fragility of all human beings, himself included. The most significant lesson he learns from the fool comes not in words but in witnessing the poor wretch's defenselessness. Poor Tom is an absolute revelation.

Lear is not only a witness to vulnerability but also a participant in it. He too is lashed by the same wind, deafened by the same thunder. In feeling in his own flesh what wretches feel, he begins to learn the best use of his means, which once included wealth, power, and majesty. He begins to appreciate that he enjoyed more than he needed, a superflux, and that his excess could be shared in a way that would spare others some of life's severest misfortunes. One who always entered first, he has become the kind of man who encourages his comrades to enter shelter ahead of him.

And yet animality takes him only so far. Our capacity to feel for the hungry, the sick, and the homeless is enhanced when we have known these extremities ourselves, yet a human being is not a mere animal. We are also storytellers, and Lear needs to learn that his story, though great, is not shared by all or even most. Tom forces Lear to recognize that others have known sufferings and injustices of their own, and that at least in some cases, their woes may outweigh even his. Tom the philosopher cannot tell him the origin of thunder, nor can he guarantee him that the world is something other than the sort of place where the strong do what they will and the weak suffer what they must. But it is a place where compassion is possible, and to feel such compassion, Lear and we must be drawn outside ourselves in a kind of ecstasy.

Even though Poor Tom has every reason to give up, to follow the devil's heed and make an end of himself, he carries on. An eater of swimming frogs, he could have become Tolkien's Gollum, but instead he clings to the conviction that good and evil must be respected, knowing that, though profoundly naïve, his alter ego Edgar's life was free from treachery. Tom may be a-cold, but he is also courageous, persisting in the face of nearly insurmountable odds, reality itself seemingly conspiring against him. His state in life is piteous, yet also triumphant, in the sense that his spirit is not broken. Later in the drama, he

will succor his own blinded father and even set affairs of family and state aright by triumphing over his diabolical half-brother. In doing so, however, he will triumph even more, by recognizing that Edmund is not half but fully his brother.

In asking Tom to tell his tale, Lear indicates that he has at last arrived at the point where he can see others in pain and recognize that they too have stories. Tom's made-up tale is that of a wastrel, a prodigal son, one who has frittered his life away in debauchery. Yet it does not end there. For he has also learned something from his supposedly misspent life, the importance of following the path of goodness. His code, consisting of many of the Ten Commandments, represents a sort of triumph, and the fact that he can share his experience makes his story profoundly redemptive.

So moving is this possibility that Lear wishes to join Tom, to tear off his clothes and become one with this stripped-down version of a human being. Real human compassion, friendship, and community require that we connect at this level, something no bureaucracy can ever manage. Lear now knows that he is first and foremost not a king but a man, differing only superficially, if at all, from others of his kind. He is learning the true limits of a ruler's power and the true magnitude of what even a bare, forked but storytelling animal can truly reveal. As a philosopher, Tom loves and pursues wisdom, and Lear has come to understand how high over mere power wisdom truly soars.

Perhaps we will never know for certain where thunder comes from, or how our notions of good and evil are woven into the fabric of reality. But this much we can know for sure: we can recognize a fellow human being on the heath, learning not only his bodily torments and deprivations but also his tale of woe. We can reach out in genuine fellow feeling, attempting to attend, comfort, and offer aid to even the most wretched among us. To those shivering a-cold, we can offer the warmth of human fellowship.

Lear will never again wield the royal scepter as before, not so much because it will never again pass within his grasp, but because he now recognizes more choice-worthy possibilities, including the path of compassion and forgiveness. He will sally forth into what life remains for him a different kind of knight, known less for his sword than his heart, a heart bearing esteem and affection for poor unaccommodated man and answering the call not to violence but service. Shakespeare invites us to see that if there is hope for humanity to diminish conflictual situations and enhance prospects for peace, it lies to a substantial extent in first-rate liberal arts education and the encounter, through it, with texts such as this. Only with compassion in our hearts can we hope to build a more just and peaceful world.

About the Author

Richard Gunderman is Chancellor's Professor of Radiology, Medical Education, Pediatrics, Philosophy, Liberal Arts, Philanthropy, and Medical Humanities and Health Studies at Indiana University, where he also serves as the John A Campbell Professor of Radiology.