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Embodied Knowledge:
Foucauldian Power Dynamics in *King Lear*

Riley Halpern

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The tragedy of Shakespeare's *King Lear* is in its characters' inability to recognize their mistakes and embrace necessary change before the consequences of those mistakes become irreversible. Edgar recognized the triviality of his dilemma after the opportunities to save his father and foil his brother's plot had passed; Lear attempted to mend his relationship with Cordelia upon the inevitability of her death; Gloucester's realization that he trusted the wrong son came too late in Edmund's quest for power; Edmund tried to save Cordelia's life with his dying breath only after she had taken hers. However, these characters—Edgar, Lear, Gloucester, and Edmund—are united in their individual experiences with a version of disability that is “defined by knowledge that results from the experience and perspective of stigmatized, nonnormative bodies” (Row-Heyveld 159). In experiencing stigmatized, nonnormative bodies, characters gain a unique form of knowledge particular to those experiences—embodied disabled knowledge. Edgar in particular gains this embodied disabled knowledge that then prompts a critical analysis of his own actions as a previously abled person. Power and knowledge, according to Michel Foucault, are inextricably tied; “it is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power” (Foucault 52). The characters in *King Lear* recognize their errors only after gaining embodied knowledge through their experiences with disability, belatedly exercising their newfound power in attempts to rectify disastrous situations. Yet, due to the relational nature of power—in that it “functions in the form of a chain...employed and exercised through a net-like organization” of individual relationships—some characters come closer than others to reversing the consequences of their previous actions (Foucault 98). Edgar finds himself subject to the relational aspect of Foucauldian

power/knowledge to a far greater extent than Lear, Gloucester and Edmund, bringing him closest—relative to the three aforementioned men—to repairing the chain of damage he left in his wake upon fleeing his father’s castle.

Prior to obtaining embodied disabled knowledge, Edgar’s initial naivety is evident in the ease with which Edmund frames him as the murderer of their father. Edmund acknowledges his brother’s innocence after convincing him to run to escape a death sentence:

...a brother so noble,
Whose nature is so far from doing harms
That he suspects none; on whose foolish honesty My
practices ride easy (1.2.187-90).

Whereas Edmund, the illegitimate son, has to gain status through cunning plots, to “have lands by wit,” Edgar, the elder, legitimate son has been guaranteed inheritance and status from the moment he was born (1.2.191). Edgar is stripped of his naivety only after he disguises himself as madman-beggar, Poor Tom o’ Bedlam, taking “the basest and most poorest shape / That ever penury in contempt of man / Brought near to beast” (2.3.7-9). In experiencing the reality of disability firsthand, Edgar is forced to find new ways to navigate “the world as structured for people who have no weakness,” (Row-Heyveld 160). As Poor Tom, Edgar weathers the storm in act three nearly naked, talking of being given nothing and enduring much. He fabricates memories of being “whipped from tithing to / tithing, and stocked, punished, and imprisoned (3.4.141-42). Committing to his role as a wandering madman-beggar, Edgar obtains an embodied knowledge of disability. He also gains the embodied knowledge of what it is to deceive, thus able to comprehend his brother’s deception where he previously could not.

Edgar’s disguise grants him access to other disabled persons—access he would not otherwise have had. Moreover, because he is, in reality, of sound mind and body, Edgar can navigate a far greater number of relationships throughout the play than any of the other disabled characters, creating a longer “chain,” a larger form of the “net-like organization” of relationships characteristic of Foucault’s relational power (98). Edgar initially

stumbles upon a mad Lear in the middle of act three only to watch the fallen king spiral further and further into madness as he ruminates over his daughters' betrayal. Lear, so entrenched in his own world, can barely comprehend the reality of Edgar's "madness," asking time and time again, "Has his daughters brought him to this pass?" (3.4.69). Therein lies the difference between each man's experience with disability. Because Lear is so obsessed with his own reality and unable to comprehend the realities of others—even the realities of those with whom he is united in disability—he does not have access to the relational power Edgar does. The key to Edgar's power lies in his understanding of those with disabilities, an understanding that is possible only because he is merely pretending he is not of sound mind. On the contrary, Lear, the farthest he has ever been from sanity, does not share in this understanding. So, Lear's embodied disabled knowledge allows him to gain a new perspective on the world without gaining a new perspective of the people in it. Still unable to understand his youngest daughter, Lear's former actions toward her "sting[ing] his mind so venomously that burning shame / Detains him from Cordelia" until her army is defeated and it is too late to reverse the damage he has done (4.4.56-57). He acknowledges he has wronged, telling his youngest, "I pray, weep not. / If you have poison for me, I will drink it" (4.7.81-82). Shortly after, the two are captured and imprisoned by Edmund, and Cordelia is hanged. Unable to stray fast and far enough from "compensating for his feelings of inferiority by cutting himself off from the rest of mankind," building relationships "aimed only at fortifying...his goal of personal superiority," Lear fails to reverse the consequences of banishing Cordelia far more drastically than will Edgar in his attempts reverse his own mistakes (McLaughlin 37-38).

Near the end of his time with the suffering Lear, Edgar has an epiphany: "How light and portable my pain seems now / When that which makes me bend makes the King bow!" (3.6.118- 19). After seeing Lear endure debilitating madness brought on by the sudden betrayal and loss of his daughters, Edgar is able to grasp the triviality of his own predicament; his mistake—his weakness—was running from his family and a situation he was too naïve to

even question. It is this realization that presents Edgar with the opportunity to help his father—who is similarly disabled in his blindness—and he begins to exercise the power that accompanies his new knowledge. Again, some of this power lies in the reality that Edgar is only pretending to be disabled as he is capable of effectively channeling his embodied knowledge into progressive actions in ways other disabled characters are not. A significant moment of understanding comes when Edgar hears Gloucester say, “I have no way and therefore want no eyes. / I stumbled when I saw” (4.1.19-20). In hearing his father acknowledge how blind he was to Edmund’s malicious scheming, Edgar is able to offer love and forgiveness to a suffering Gloucester when he says, “Give me thy arm. / Poor Tom shall lead thee” (4.2.89-90). Because he is not preoccupied by his own disability and able to understand his father’s disabled reality, Edgar is able to save his father’s life, at least initially. When Gloucester hopes to jump from a cliff to his death, Edgar constructs an entire reality for his blind father so he falls mere feet off of a hill while believing he fell much farther. And after the “fall,” Edgar takes on a new disabled persona—a peasant—saying to Gloucester, “Thy life’s a miracle,” granting his father the strength to live a bit longer (4.6.69). Where Edgar is able to quickly interpret and understand Gloucester’s language at the beginning of the scene, Gloucester is unable to recognize earlier on that Edmund had ordered his blinding until Regan tells him, even calling to his younger son, “Edmund, enkindle all the sparks of nature / To quit this horrid act” (3.7.105-6). This discrepancy best exemplifies Edgar’s greater embodied disabled knowledge than that of his father. Moreover, Gloucester is so disheartened by his blindness that he does not find himself interacting with other disabled persons in the same way Edgar has been for a majority of the play. Gloucester does not form a “net-like organization” of individual relationships the way his eldest son does (Foucault 98). Subsequently, Edgar is able to save his father’s life once while Gloucester only grasps that Edmund is the true villain too late to stop his plot, too late to save even himself.

Edmund, perhaps the most intriguing of the disabled characters, lived all his life with the disability of his illegitimacy. One’s status as an illegitimate child is considered a disability

insofar as it fits into Row-Heyveld's characterization of disabled bodies as "stigmatized" and "nonnormative" (159). To be illegitimate is to be stigmatized, to be nonnormative, which is seen early in the play when Gloucester says, in reference to Edmund, "His breeding, sir, hath been at my charge. I have so often blushed to acknowledge him that I am now brazed to 't" (1.1.9-11). Gloucester is ashamed of his illegitimate son, and Edmund's status leaves both of them open to ridicule. Yet because Edmund viewed his illegitimacy merely as a disadvantage by which others could insult him, he never gained any sort of embodied knowledge from it. He neither embraces it to any extent nor uses it as an opportunity to understand others or the world around him. He bitterly scorns the way society brands him a bastard, using his bitterness to fuel his quest for vengeance:

Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land.
Our father's love is to the bastard Edmund
As to th' legitimate. Fine word, "legitimate."
Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed
And my intention thrive, Edmund the base
Shall top th' legitimate. I grow, I prosper.
Now, gods, stand up for bastards! (1.2.17-23).

Edgar, simply because he is the eldest son *and* legitimate, interacts with his brother without any knowledge or understanding of what he is going through as a bastard in a society that disdains illegitimate children. In the end, Edgar's understanding of Edmund's deception by means of his *own* deception—counterfeiting as Poor Tom—grants him the power to be the cause of his brother's death in their final duel. Upon drawing his sword, Edgar says to his brother, "...thou art a traitor, / False to thy gods, thy brother, and thy father" (5.3.161-62). Edgar knows exactly who his brother is—both literally and the evil that dwells in his heart and his actions—yet Edmund cannot fathom his naïve brother ever drawing a sword against him. As with Gloucester, Edmund does not understand the reality of the situation until Edgar explicitly tells him.

In another vein, Edmund's fatal wound could be viewed as the disability that leads to a shred of embodied knowledge and the analysis of his previous actions. As he lay dying, Edmund retracts

Cordelia's death sentence, saying, "I pant for life. Some good I mean to do / Despite of mine own nature" (5.3.291-92). The most futile of all attempts throughout the play to reverse any consequences of previous actions, Edmund has neither embraced the embodied knowledge accompanying disability nor interacted with other disabled persons to possess the relational power Edgar does. Like his father, Edmund does not form the "chains" and "net-like organization" necessary to produce the relational power on which he can draw (Foucault 98). His order to save Cordelia comes too late, after she has already been hanged, and her death leads to that of her father.

The power/knowledge with which Edgar finds himself at the end of *King Lear* is far more substantial than that of anyone else in the play. He embodies not one but two disabled personas—madman-beggar Poor Tom and a peasant—and he interacts with a plethora of disabled persons in his own experience with disability: Lear in his madness, Gloucester in his blindness, Edmund in his illegitimacy, even Lear's Fool who is disabled in experiencing "what it means to be silenced...destitute...and to live (or die) at the mercy of others' amusement or contempt" (Row-Heyveld 160). This relational power is what enables Edgar to come closer than any other character to reversing the consequences of his previous actions; when Edgar fled Gloucester's castle, he granted Edmund the confidence to carry out his scheming quest for land, wealth, and status. In observing Lear's madness, Edgar is able to gain a sense of understanding of a parent's love which allows him to forgive Gloucester and initially save his father's life. And, in the end, Edgar is the one to stop Edmund from harming anyone else. Yet, though he makes a valiant attempt to save those around him, Edgar's extensive embodied knowledge comes too late to fully reverse the consequences of his choices prior to his unique experience with disability.

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