

# King Lear Under COVID-19 Lockdown

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Recently a tweet from singer-songwriter Rosanne Cash went viral declaring that Shakespeare wrote *King Lear* while quarantined for plague.<sup>1</sup> Although the words were meant to quicken our pens, they moved me instead to spend some solitary hours outside the hospital rereading this monumental play. Widely considered to be Shakespeare's most psychologically nuanced tragedy, *King Lear* tells the story of an elderly king who unfairly divides his kingdom, is betrayed by his heirs, and descends into madness. The play has given me chills many times over, but I never appreciated Lear raving in the storm as I do now in the storm of novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). Although Lear spends much of the play wandering on a desolate heath, his confrontation with an unspeakable chaos that dismantles the old order mirrors the existential dread of our moment. As a pediatrics intern training in New York City, I had turned to the play in search of the comfort of a well-worn story. What emerged were new lessons that reflect the different world and perspective we now inhabit.

When Lear's daughter Regan asks why he needs his companions, he answers, "O, reason not the need...Allow not nature more than nature needs,/Man's life's as cheap as beast's."<sup>2</sup> The austere lifestyle of lockdown is a reminder that we yearn for more than mere survival; being deprived of human presence has made me recognize how entwined our needs are with others'. I miss giving friends and patients hugs—even the formal if still infectious gesture of a handshake.

Meanwhile, the bare necessities for survival are reported to be critically low or depleted at area hospitals: personal protective equipment, sufficient staffing, and in many cases, ventilators are required to safely care for COVID-19 patients. "The art of our necessities is strange,/That can make vile things precious."<sup>2</sup> Who could have imagined that the masks and gowns we ran through so routinely would become such prized commodities?

Of late, I have shuddered to witness the explosive ire of strangers in grocery stores or on my way to work—to say nothing of the tensions in the hospital. Lear too is incensed by characters who wrong him, but over the course of his travails, he comes to a startling awareness of their anguish: "we are not ourselves," he says, "When nature, being oppress'd, commands the mind/To suffer with the body."<sup>2</sup> Lear discerns that, when taxed by illness or affliction, we may not behave our best, and I hold this lesson close when I encounter people who act harshly. Besides, I need only look the other way to find those offering to help in sundry ways—from donating supplies to walking dogs to simply checking in. These people act in tune with Lear's reflection on the suffering he newly registers:

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,  
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,  
How shall your household heads 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 feel what wretches feel,  
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,  
And show the heavens more just.<sup>2</sup>

Only by enduring the "pitiless storm" does Lear arrive at this plane of wisdom and charity. I hope that the current conditions that ravage all comers may compel our compassion, that we may in turn show up for each other to "show the heavens more just."

Indeed this, our plague, may help us find solidarity where we once only saw difference. While wandering in the storm, Lear looks upon a naked man and remarks on the elemental connection they share: "Thou art the thing itself:/unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor bare,/forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings!"<sup>2</sup> We wear but borrowed garments, live on borrowed time, and the sooner we recognize our common humanity, the sooner we may ease each other's suffering. That very man on whom Lear waxed poetic says as much: "Who alone suffers suffers most i' the mind,/Leaving free things and happy shows behind:/But then the mind much sufferance doth o'er skip,/When grief hath mates, and bearing fellowship."<sup>2</sup> This fellowship is hard to feel when we are confined to our separate spheres; however, although we must physically distance, we can depend on various outlets to remain socially anchored—phone calls, FaceTime, Twitter chats, letters, texts; even art and literature, contemporary and indeed stretching back to early modern England.

One of the most enigmatic and entertaining characters in *King Lear* is the Fool. The Fool in literature is perhaps the best representation of gallows humor, the balm of wit to soothe but not delude the anguished mind. As Lear rages at the storm, "None but the fool" accompanies him, "who labours to outjest/His heart-struck injuries."<sup>2</sup> The Fool, one might say, speaks truth to power, chiding Lear for his misjudgments and goading on his reason from the relatively safe promontory of humor. An outsider and insider, the Fool is a topsy-turvy observer who provides an apt commentary on the follies of mankind. He beseeches Lear to "keep a schoolmaster that can teach/thy fool to lie: I would fain learn to lie."<sup>2</sup> But lie he cannot, and we might learn from his example in applying humor to represent inconvenient truths—and certainly as a means to cope.

In many ways, the Fool is a foil to Cordelia, Lear's soft-spoken, gold-hearted daughter. In past readings, I remember warming to Cordelia's philosophy to "Love, and be silent."<sup>2</sup> But that declaration feels puny now, when all the world necessarily is a stage and we need to speak up to move others. We cannot afford her "tardiness in nature/Which often leaves the history unspoke/That it intends to do."<sup>2</sup> Instead, we must be as transparent and emphatic as possible about what is happening, hoping it will reach people who can help repair our health care system, public health policy, and moral erosion among the nation's leaders. Even as he's dying, the play's amoral and ruthless antagonist Edmund undergoes a change of villainous heart when he hears his older brother Edgar



William Dyce (1806-1864), *King Lear and the Fool in the Storm*, circa 1851, Scottish. Oil on canvas. 136 cm × 173 cm. Collection of the National Galleries of Scotland, Scottish National Gallery. Purchased with assistance of the Art Fund, 1993.

(Lear's godson) narrate his personal tragedy: "This speech of yours hath moved me, / And shall perchance do good."<sup>2</sup> Words compel action, for better or for worse. The play concludes with the proclamation: "The weight of this sad time we must obey; / Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say."<sup>2</sup> These words reverberate: now is not the time to be silent or restrained by custom but rather to speak honestly and steadfastly into the void.<sup>3</sup>

Whether or not we inhabit a new world, we may claim new vision in confronting COVID-19. Let us harness this insight and learn to live more deliberately for the enormity of what we are witnessing. Lear's friend and ally, the Earl of Gloucester, after his eyes are brutally plucked out, laments, "I stumbled when I saw: full oft 'tis seen, / Our means secure us, and our mere defects / Prove our commodities."<sup>2</sup> Henceforth, he comes to approach the world differently: "I see it feelingly."<sup>2</sup> At this time, when we cannot see the way forward clearly, may we all see the world "feelingly," our hearts and minds engaged. This way of seeing contrasts with those unwilling to see things as they are. The corruption of vision of some of our national leaders, for example, follows a centuries-old pattern, as Lear tells Gloucester, "Get thee glass eyes; / And like a scurvy politician, seem / To see the things thou dost not."<sup>2</sup>

Yet for every apparent villain, there are many people striving to salvage our society, whether by staying home, delivering

mail, stocking groceries, disposing of waste, or laboring in the hospital. In the face of this relentless rain, when I feel most tempted to despair, I need only remember Edgar's words to his embattled father: "Men must endure / Their going hence, even as their coming hither; / Ripeness is all: come on."<sup>2</sup> And come on we must, moved to action but also, as we need it, to repose, recognizing we all have a part to play in the drama that unfolds. Even under lockdown, each of us has the capacity to shape what happens next. Together, we must endure—separate, for now, but connected.

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1. @rosannecash. Just a reminder that when Shakespeare was quarantined because of the plague, he wrote *King Lear*. Published March 14, 2020. Accessed April 6, 2020. <https://twitter.com/rosannecash/status/1238700345548627969>

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