

Essay

“And Thou, all-Shaking Thunder . . . ” A Theological Notation to Lines 1–38 of *King Lear*, Act III, Scene II

William C. Hackett

Belmont University, Nashville, TN 37067, USA; wch9u@virginia.edu

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Abstract: In the dramas of Shakespeare, the madman and the fool speak in prose; wisdom and sanity are properly poeticised. *King Lear* is no exception: I go some way in providing a theological notation to a crucial moment of Lear’s descent into madness, the fracturing of his blank verse into prose. Is the storm on the heath a representation of the turmoil of his mind? Or is it a theophany, the manifestation of divine displeasure at human foolishness? Finding between the verse and the prose the theological tradition of Christianity will allow us to negotiate this question and to understand a little more clearly the peculiar wisdom of poetry for Christianity.

Keywords: Shakespeare and Theology; Poetry and Religion; Wrath; Foolishness; Hans Blumenberg

*Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
Till you have drench’d our steeples, drown’d the cocks!
You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,
Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
Strike flat the thick rotundity o’ the world!
Crack nature’s moulds, all germens spill at once
That make ingrateful man! (lines 1–11)¹*

—said Lear, the King, halfway down the road to madness; a road tragically of his own making. With these words, we find him wandering in a coverless heath, in the dark, unprotected from the elements, in the midst of a terrible storm. The rage of the elements mirrors the internal derangement of his mind. Lear will finally take the advice of his last companions and escape the storm, just as the stormy trial of his life, beyond its nadir, finally turns him from madness to the peculiar clarity of despair. Madness is not the end for Lear, though this is no comedy: Lear dies of grief with his full wits about him, after killing his would-be executioner, though not before his devoted daughter Cordelia is killed by him. His misfortunes begin with an ambiguous action: wanting to retire in old age from the duties of monarchy, Lear divides his kingdom between Goneril and Regan, his falsely flattering daughters, disinheriting Cordelia, who refuses to flatter him. In contrast to her sisters, she virtuously allows her love to be manifest in a lack of adequate speech. This event leads Lear down a dark path into loss and madness, even to the point of his own aphasia: “sa, sa, sa, sa,” he babbles in response to the perceived inanity of the world in Act IV, Scene VI. This is, says an observer, “a sight most pitiful in the meanest wretch,” but “Past speaking of in a king!” (lines 221–22). Cordelia’s modest silence of

¹ In this text I use the Arden Shakespeare: Third Series edition of *King Lear*. (Shakespeare 1997, pp. 263–64).

love in Act I, Scene I (“... I am sure, my love’s/more richer than my tongue,” lines 80–81) finds its dark parallel in the mad silence of her father’s raving. Between the time of his foolish act and the nadir of his madness, Lear is rendered homeless and destitute by Goneril and Regan, who confess to one another that they take him for a fool. He becomes a wandering solitary, except for the presence of his court fool and a devoted friend, the Earl of Kent, previously banished for expressing his indignation at Lear’s actions, now disguised as a hired servant, Caius. It is before Caius/Kent enters the scene on the heath that Lear utters the words above in the presence of his court fool.

In the following notation to III.2, 1–38, I will examine aspects of the Christian theological tradition in the Bard’s dramatic construction.² I will argue that “between” verse and prose, the divine presence is signified, as, so to speak, an Absence that draws human passion and language into its sphere of signification and disrupts it. Shakespeare is, here, a “negative theologian”—albeit not in *silence*, but through a peculiar “theological aesthetic” with roots plunged in the biblical prophetic corpus, where the divine sphere of *justice rooted in love* is reached through the tragi-drama of human experience.³

1. Introduction

1.1. Between Verse and Prose

If Lear is the “greatest tragedy composed by man” (Shaw), it is also a profoundly theological work of art.⁴ Act III, Scene II, where our attention is focused, is a site where poetic snatches invade the drama: three difficult wisdom-poems or riddles are uttered by the fool to a king whose foolishness has led him to the loss of his kingdom, family, house, and his own wits (lines 25–36; 78–81; 83–99). Here, the jester, the royal court’s instituted *divertissement* from the serious business of reign in the world, utters wisdom that the classical archetype of wisdom, the king, has lost. This great reversal of wisdom and foolishness is a peculiarly Christian trope: found in the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels, this vision culminates in St. Paul’s great theologoumenon of the Cross as the definitive revelation of divine wisdom that manifests under the form of the greatest foolishness known to humanity and the cosmic powers. Just as the greatest expressions of Pauline theology culminate in intellectually dense poetic hymns, the poetic medium is a site—here, for Shakespeare—where wisdom climaxes in prophecy.⁵ I acknowledge the presence of these wisdom-poems of the fool here but, bracketing them, I would like to focus on the poetry of the drama itself, the (mostly) blank verse of Lear (lines 1–11; 13–23) and Kent (lines 31–38).⁶ I will initiate my approach to this task by reference to the thought of Hans Blumenberg, a major figure within the modern tradition of philosophical anthropology, initiated by Max Scheler

² A good discussion concerning the distinction between the Quarto (1608) and first Folio (1623) editions of *Lear* in relation to the play of verse and prose between these editions (which have about 850 verbal variants between them) may be found in the fourth chapter of John Jones, *Shakespeare at Work* (Jones 2000). Jones builds, of course, on the work of Peter Blayney, *The Texts of King Lear and their Origins* (Blayney 1982). For both versions in a single volume, see *King Lear: the 1608 Quarto and 1623 Folio Texts* (Shakespeare 2000).

³ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their insights that helped me re-envision, recast, and develop this brief notation in several fundamental ways.

⁴ For an overview of the history of the theological interpretation of Shakespeare, see the introduction to David Beauregard, *Catholic Theology in Shakespeare’s Plays* (Beauregard 2008). This is an important work because it takes into account the contemporary revisionist interpretation of the English Reformation initiated in particular by Eamon Duffey’s *The Stripping of the Altars* (Duffey 2002).

⁵ See archetypically Ephesians 1:3–23, Colossians 1:9–23, but also Philippians 2:5–11 and Romans 11:32–36.

⁶ See Gottlieb Gaier’s comments on these snatches of the fool, “The Fool’s Prophecy as a Key to his Function in ‘King Lear’”. (Gaier 1986, pp. 113–17)

in Germany between the wars, but developed (in a sometimes strictly materialist vein) through the twentieth century by Helmuth Plessner,⁷ Arnold Gehlen⁸, and, especially, Blumenberg himself.⁹

1.2. From Philosophical Anthropology to Dramatic Poetry

Before it is a genre of literature, poetry is a response to experience, a response that creates *experience*—a response to what Blumenberg called the “absolutism of reality.”¹⁰

According to Arnold Gehlen and then Blumenberg, the primordial source of human culture is the remarkable adaptation of an evolutionary weak and maladapted creature that made possible its unlikely survival in a harsh world. Making up for an evolutionary “deficiency”, human beings convert nature into culture. Culture, language, symbol, narrative, myth, metaphor, and institutions are only extensions of an original survival mechanism.

Imagine language as an extension of primal song, guttural, spontaneous, co-emerging with dance, probably in a collective rhythm; imagine small communities of anthropoids gathered around the evening fire, under the stars, at the edge of the protecting cave.¹¹ For Blumenberg, a human being is the result of some primordial trauma, a creature forced out from the protective canopy of the forest onto the ground and into the open savannah. Naked and afraid, original humanity finds shelter in womb-like caves and in the images, stories, and ritualized reenactments of normative performances of survival (the hunt, war, migration, etc.) that give comprehensible meaning to this new order of experience. In humanizing the world, proto-humanity humanizes itself. The cave represents its origin out of which it has been forced: humanity must return to the cave for protection, but can never stay there, in order to survive. This movement from protecting darkness into the terrifying open is mediated by original metaphors through which the unknown may become known through a comparison with the familiar.¹²

Poetry in this larger sense that Blumenberg’s philosophical anthropology gives it must, or should, incorporate any or every genre of literature. “Poetry,” then, is the essence of human language—in the sense that language is our attempt to fill the void that our own excess over our human environment, the world, creates.

A glance shows us that the lines of *King Lear* are mostly blank verse and are often mixed with prose to signify the king’s descent into madness: the forms are mixed. Poetic speech signifies culture or wisdom or insight or intensified humanity (for example, the transformation by the presence of the beloved),¹³ which in Shakespeare, neither the mad nor the uneducated possess.¹⁴ There is less to no mediation of the “absolutism of reality” for the madman. In his descent into madness, Lear becomes more and more identified with the “mad ragings” of heath and the storm. How does this

⁷ See especially Plessner (1928), *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch. Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie*. Berlin. For an introduction to Plessner in the context of the modern discipline of Philosophical Anthropology, see Plessner’s *Philosophical Anthropology: Perspectives and Prospects* (Plessner 2015).

⁸ *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt*, (Gehlen 1940) (*Man, his Nature and Place in the World*, (Gehlen 1988)) and *Die Seele im technischen Zeitalter*, (Gehlen 1957) (*Man in the Age of Technology*, (Gehlen 1980)).

⁹ For an introduction see Pini Efergan, “Hans Blumenberg’s Philosophical Project: Metaphorology as Anthropology” (Efergan 2015, pp. 359–77), and Denis Treirweiler, *Hans Blumenberg: anthropologie philosophique* (Treirweiler 2010).

¹⁰ Following, in the main, Arnold Gehlen’s thesis. See Hans Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos* (Blumenberg 1979), and *Höhlenausgänge* (Blumenberg 1989). On the connection between Gehlen and Blumenberg, see chapters one and three of Angus Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences: Hans Blumenberg’s Theory of Myth*. (Nicholls 2015)

¹¹ See the remarks of Robert Bellah in chapters one and two of *Religion and Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*. (Bellah 2011) According to Bellah (in the wake of his teacher, Merlin Donald), language is (or may be) co-extensive with myth and religion: the human capacity for signification arises out of the needs for survival, but freely develops in the context of “play” when the totality of human experience is reflected on in pursuit of its significance.

¹² See chapter one of Hans Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos (Work on Myth)* (Blumenberg 1988)

¹³ I am thinking, for example, of the versification when Lear finally turns angry at Oswald’s rudeness (I, 4) or when Viola encounters the Duke in *Twelfth Night* and “Cesario’s” prose turns over into verse.

¹⁴ Following, of course, Marlowe: see Richard Flatter’s discussion of Shakespeare’s dramatic poetification of language in the context of Marlowe and Goethe in “The Veil of Beauty”, (Flatter 1951, pp. 437–50, esp. 440–47).

identification play on the formal plane? Verse, said Flatter, is used by Shakespeare “to express nature.”¹⁵ When contrasted to verse, prose seems to signify the *disordering* of nature. When contrasted to prose, verse seems to indicate *intensifications* or even the *transcendence* of “nature” (two modalities that are not mutually exclusive). We may discern echoes, in this latter case, of the *theia mania*, “divine madness” of Plato.¹⁶ A human being is at the center of the cosmic theatre of Shakespeare, and whether disordering or intensification/transcendence is signified, humanity is at the center, organically integrated into a whole—let us call it the human cosmos—that may become, through the Bard’s own aesthetic play between the depoeticization and poeticization of language, a *theophany*. Behold the theological (I could almost say *shamanistic*) work of dramatic poetry that this notation wants to uncover.

Anyone pursuing this line must begin by taking note of Jonathan Tate’s conclusion to his exhaustive study of the transitions between verse and prose in the “formal landscape” of Shakespeare’s dramatic corpus: “there are, to be sure, general, dependable patterns—prose is often comic, verse is spoken by nobility,” but that, these are, in the end, “heuristic” conventions, “guidelines without guarantees.” But taking note of this in no way precludes setting out in the direction they indicate.¹⁷ Rather, it provides the tracks on which we can run: the theological becomes possible through this heuristic aesthetics of language. Let us discover this.

2. Notation

2.1. *The Wanderer. The Storm. The Heath*

To commence the notation, I propose a question: does this storm on the exposed heath represent the storm of divine wrath or of human madness? This is a question not to be answered, but to allow entry into the theological dimension of the play.¹⁸

Let us first approach it as divine wrath. Shakespeare’s tragedies can be categorized by the particular emotion of which they serve to give the very phenomenality: *Lear* presents the form or *eidos* of anger, as *Othello* presents jealousy or *Hamlet* presents grief.¹⁹ Anger, like other emotions, may lead to a departure from reasonability, or madness, in humans, and to just “wrath” in God (as anthropomorphically, and normatively, represented by the Bible). The heath is a wilderness, which in the Bible, is a place of divine rejection or alienation, the rearing specter of original chaos, the haunt of unclean animals and demons. It is the opposite of the cultivated garden, the protected community, the world mastered by humanity and brought to fruition. So, already we have offered to us a simple correlation triangulating the three metaphysical domains of divinity, humanity, and the world: God-wrath; human-madness; nature-wilderness. As literary symbols, these three primary qualifications of the *eidos* of anger proper to divinity, humanity, or the cosmos may refer to one another: divine wrath is symbolized by madness (or de-humanization) in humanity and wilderness (or de-fructification) in nature, and so on.

In the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible, the natural world is typically called on to witness the justice of God in his prosecution and judgment of human sin and folly.²⁰ Similarly, in lines 1–11, quoted above, the witness of nature is a just instrument of retribution that rebalances the scale of justice. Hence, *Lear* calls on three dimensions of nature’s power, classical personifications of divine wrath in Hebrew idiom (as well as Greek): wind, water, lightning (fire), and thunder.

Recalling the flood of Noah in Genesis 6:9–9:17, the storm of divine wrath is called on to drench “our steeples” and even drown “the cocks” that sit on their pinnacles (line 5). Like the tower of Babel

¹⁵ Ibid. 450.

¹⁶ See *Phaedrus* 244a–245c. And Josef Pieper, *Divine Madness: Plato’s Case Against Secular Humanism*. (Pieper 1995)

¹⁷ Joseph Tate, “Shakespeare, Prose and Verse: Unreadable Forms,” (Tate 2005, p. 291).

¹⁸ Questions in this theological notation, as in philosophy, are not for “answering,” but for deepening.

¹⁹ See *Catholic Theology in Shakespeare’s Plays*, (Beauregard 2008, p. 98).

²⁰ See, as an example, Psalm 50:4–ff.

in Genesis 11:1–9, the reaches of human religious striving are condemned, fractured into moments of chaotic babbling, that echoes the seas of chaos that previously swallowed the world: Lear's descent into aphasic madness from the starting point of this poetic judgment on himself and his world uttered from his own lips echoes this biblical trope.

The lightning is called on by Lear to strike himself as divine judgment on his actions, and the thunder is called on to "strike flat the thick rotundity o' the world" (line 9). Humanity as such (represented by the king) and the entire world falls under judgment. Finally, Lear calls down the power of divine retribution on human folly, an imprecation on the human condition that reaches its climax with the greatest possible curse, beyond that of Noah, of Babel, and beyond, far beyond that imagined in Christian eschatology: "Crack nature's moulds, all germens spill at once/That make ingrateful man!" (lines 10–11). The order of nature that brings about humans should never have been made, exclaims Lear, for this created the conditions for such foolishness as his own.

In the Book of Genesis, God creates a world by mastering and ordering chaos. The Creator gives this ordered world to a special creature, who should represent his divine rule, in part by expanding and deepening it through the sovereign, divine-like ordering of nature by human culture. Original humanity fails this task so completely, distorting and corrupting the world so fully that the Creator de-creates the world (with the flood) and creates it anew by drawing back again the formless waters of chaos.²¹ Building on this archetype of re-creation through just judgment, the classical Christian vision of the last things centers on the fulfillment of human nature, the complete eradication or erasure of all evil, and the total realization of the good, the blossoming of the original intention of the Creator in the creation, accomplished *through* the suffering and death of Christ. Christian eschatology, by contrast to (the letter at least) Lear's prophetic cursing, does not involve annihilation, or the undoing of the Creator's primary plan. It is as if Lear wants to go all the way with what the Creator himself refused with the flood of Noah: though God "repented" of his work of creation because of the extensive wickedness of humankind, he nevertheless preserved a microcosm of the created world in the ark-temple that floated on the seas of destruction. Yet there is no rainbow of covenanted peace between God and creation in Lear's own despairing vision, no silver lining in the storm cloud of wrath. Is this human anger expressing a wish to be divine wrath (and therefore, biblically speaking, the height of human folly)? Or is it a powerfully effective hyperbole designed to shock the audience and to prepare for the unfolding of the phenomenon of anger through its three-fold symbolization at the divine, human, and cosmic levels? It is likely both. The classical Christian interpretation of the sin of *superbia*, pride as the archetype of all sins both in original humanity and in the fallen angelic beings, is deeply present here.²²

The Christian vision wishes to echo faithfully or rather to intensify, to expand the ancient prophetic vision of grace through judgment, of redemption through the purifying fire of wrath: "God," says the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, "disciplines those whom he loves . . . as a father disciplines his son."²³ The paradigm of this ultimate vision is resurrection, new life, on the other side of death, passage through the flood of judgment (symbolized in baptism) into the beatitude of perfectly reconciled intimacy with the Creator and one's fellow creatures. Its fruit is liberation, joy, and peace. The means of its realization is the world transforming power of charity, which alone defeats the dark powers of maleficent spiritual forces and of the human heart and unlocks, as it were, the divine life, that lies dormant at the root of all things. There is no (ultimate) place for tragedy in the Christian vision of the world. Even if micro-tragedies are indeed present in the world, if, indeed, the world is saturated

²¹ See Geerhard von Rad, "The Biblical Primeval History". (Von Rad 1973, pp. 45–162).

²² See the locus classicus, Isaiah 14:4–23 and St. Augustine's *A Treatise on Nature and Grace*, ch. 33 (*Four Anti-Pelagian Writings*) (Classicus and St. Augustine 1992), which correlates the pride of the devil in his fall and the pride of humanity in theirs through the serpent's temptation. As Augustine gets older, he shifts his conception of the source of sin from *cupiditas* to *superbia*.

²³ Hebrews 12:6. (Quotations from the Bible are from the Authorized Version unless otherwise specified.) See Isaiah chapters 1–5 for an initial (and shocking) statement of the particularly Isaianic theme of salvation through judgment.

with them, they are in the end swallowed up in the abyss of love that is divine life: “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes,” asserts St. John the Divine, the seer of the Apocalypse, “and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”²⁴ This final vision of Christianity has been washed away before Shakespeare’s audience by the intensity of Lear’s tears, by the terror of the theophanic storm he beholds and which reflects the violent turmoil within himself: the hyperbole of the imprecation, on the call of divine wrath on nature and humanity, is part of its essence, for it is a manifestation of human emotion. Lear is, indeed, “one minded like the weather, most unquietly,” says a Gentleman to Kent (Act III, Scene 1, line 2). But the divine answer to this imprecation is the tale told, not one of tearing apart the foundations of the earth, but one of descent into madness and storm and a transformation: salvation through judgment. As in the delightful Book of Jonah, Lear must descend into the depths of divine wrath (the sea for the Hebrew prophet; the stormy heath and madness for the English king) in order, so to speak, to learn his lesson.

Hence: this is only the beginning of the play, a setting of the stage for a descent and return from madness; though a tragedy, it is also a tale of salvation.²⁵ If not Christian, neither is Lear’s curse on humanity and the world exactly pagan: Greek tragedy turns on the reconciliation of humanity with its own mortality, under the unconquerable enigma of the will and purpose of the immortal gods. With that said, Lear’s curse on the world and humanity *tout court* is not necessarily non-Christian. Lear is a pre-Roman, pre-Christian Celtic king of the Britons, whose story had become a common theme on the Elizabethan stage.²⁶ Lear’s appeal to the order of nature to bring about, through its own radical implosion, even a *de-creation*, the destruction of the world and humanity is clearly best taken as hyperbole, as the cry of a human heart, which always breaks the boundaries of proper and adequate theology (. . . theology being always necessarily a peculiarly sane, level-headed activity). Shakespeare is not a theologian. Though his Lear should be read as a deeply religious representation of humanity: he certainly echoes the cries of the prophet Jeremiah and of Job: “cursed is the day I was born!”²⁷ Jeremiah and Job are both witness to human folly in a manner different from one another and from Lear, but both the humanity and the folly they witness is the same: Jeremiah struggles with his vocation to be the prophet against Israel’s folly and the great divine retribution of the Babylonian exile, and Job cries out against the terrible torment he suffers that has been released on him under the authority of the Almighty whose actions he does not comprehend and cannot (yet) come to terms with. (Lear is of course further Job-like in his immersion in a theophanic-type storm and in his passage from possessing all to possessing nothing—though very un-Job-like in his tragic ending.)²⁸ Thus, from within his descending madness, we could say that the pre-Christian King Lear sees with Christian clarity the extent of his own folly, and rightly, from a Christian perspective, demands that the perfect justice of God destroy it. How can man, the creature that shares, uniquely, the divine image, perform such a deed that, beyond mere wickedness, is utterly foolish? Lear’s madness only manifests the madness of humanity as such, astoundingly capable of such folly as his own. The madness of humanity intimately corresponds to the wrath of God.

²⁴ Apocalypse 21:4.

²⁵ These are therefore not necessarily mutually exclusive. See Terry Eagleton’s deeply critical remarks on George Steiner’s view that Christianity is inherently anti-tragic in *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*. esp. ch. 2 “The Value of Agony”. (Eagleton 2003, pp. 23–39)

²⁶ See the 12th century Geoffrey of Monmouth’s, *History of the Kings of Britain*, translated from the Latin in the 18th century by Aaron Thompson and corrected by J. A. Giles in 1842. A modern edition is Lewis Thorpe. (Monmouth 1977)

²⁷ Job 3:3; Jeremiah 20:14.

²⁸ As usual, the comparison to a Biblical theme or figure in Shakespeare is partly one of contrast. See “The Patience of Lear: King Lear and Job,” the final chapter of Hannibal Hamelin, *The Bible in Shakespeare*. (Hamelin 2013, pp. 305–32)

2.2. Identifying and Illustrating the Antinomy

We were right, then, to accept the word of the Gentleman quoted above and to see the storm as a natural symbolization of Lear's madness. However, we were right too, to find Shakespeare's allusions to the Biblical picture of God and nature: these are truly "wrathful skies," Kent will say, as we will see below. An antinomy begins to appear: this means that, theologically, we are on the right track. The storm is a symbol, a manifestation of Lear's foolishness and of the human madness before God that it so acutely manifests. And yet the storm, a theophany, is the manifestation of divine judgment on the foolishness of humanity: the fabric of nature is torn apart.²⁹ The divine avenger has come to deal with one who sets himself against him. A subjective projection of psychological inner depths and a terrifyingly objective manifestation of divine transcendence: the culmination of an identification between human subjective depths and the movements of the natural world, on the one hand, and the erasure of human will before a divine movement that approaches it from without. The quintessence, therefore, of both human power and powerlessness: how to express this antinomy? How to take hold of both trajectories and to ride them equally in different directions? How to manipulate our focus so that this diplopic picture folds into a single crisp image?

Does the theological tradition of Christianity give us any further resources for understanding this antinomy than symbol and narrative?

2.3. Elevation to a Theological Concept

Here we must turn to Biblical literature to illumine the soul of English literature; we must open a biblical parenthesis in the notation. An antinomy is uncovered, and the *theological* aim of this notation must ask whether the literary symbolics of the storm-madness-wrath within which this antinomy has emerged can be further investigated in its intelligibility, now taking the antinomy as the entry point.

A Pauline principle found in the opening chapter of the Apostle's most systematic and lucid letter nearly brings what is precisely at play here to a conceptual level in this correlation between nature as the external symbolization of human peace or strife and nature as the site of demonstration of a divine blessing or curse. There, St. Paul exclaims with the apostolic lucidity and rigor that is his signature:

"The wrath of God (*orgE tou Theou*) is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who hold the truth in unrighteousness."³⁰

This terrifying exclamation is a hallmark of primitive Christian proclamation.³¹ For the Apostle to the Gentiles, the divine *orgE* is a manifestation of divine righteousness before human unrighteousness. This revelation of divine righteousness (*dikaosounE*) or justice, justification—God's justification of his own action that is the essence of St. Paul's message, the *euangelion*, Gospel—is found *principally* in the ultimate, final, last exposure of the unrighteousness of humanity by the hot, white light of God's ultimate, final, last action that consummates history: the death and resurrection of Christ, the Messiah.³² In the Apostolic preaching, the wrath of God poured out on the Cross in the death of Jesus creates the opening of a safe passage through the final storm of the last judgment into the blessedness that alone fulfills human nature. This passage into "eternal life" in the future and "fruit of holiness"

²⁹ For a textual justification of the theophanic reading of the storm to supplement the theological and symbolic one offered here, see Gloucester's speech in I.2: "These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good for us. Though the wisdom of Nature can reason it thus and thus, yet Nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects," and so on (103–18). Edmund's response (119–33), speaking of a "heavenly compulsion" (123) and a "divine thrusting on" (126–27), as well as his following conversation with Edgar intensifies the correlation between nature and the human soul under an invisible and elusive divine providence by an allusion to astrology.

³⁰ Romans 1:18.

³¹ See Hans Urs von Balthasar's conference "Christ the Redeemer," in Balthasar and Speyr, *To the Heart of the Mystery of Redemption*. (Von Balthasar 2010, pp. 15–43)

³² See the modern locus classicus of atonement theory in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV.1, translated as *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*. (Barth 2004)

in the present is the “gift” of God (in opposition to what is earned by humanity without this gift, the “wages of death”), he will say, culminating the discussion initiated here in 6:23.

This great disclosure of the *orgE tou Theou* against human unrighteousness (principally in Christ, who passed through it, into the blessedness of resurrection life, and to whom believers are joined in both the death of the *orgE* and the life of the resurrection) is for God’s part just “because,” St. Paul continues in the following verse, “that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them” (v. 19). Christ’s “passing through” death into new life is an advanced appearance of the *eschata*, the last things themselves: divine judgment, on the one hand, and mercy (*through* the judgment) on the other. All are judged and found wanting; it is in Christ that all (or some, depending on the school of interpretation) pass through the wrath of judgment into the blessedness of resurrection life.

At this point in St. Paul’s argument, however, he is concerned with showing that God is just in bringing about the last judgment, in pouring out his wrath on all as is manifested in advance in Christ because of the innate knowledge of his nature and being that humans possess, but have purposefully failed to acknowledge. The very famous following verse explains this divine “shewing,” or making evident: “For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead” (v. 20). Repeating the ascription of guilt based on knowledge he correlates an action (human unrighteousness despite knowledge) with its immediate effect: “so that they are without excuse: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were they thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish hearts were darkened” (v. 21).

The principle that we are looking for in this biblical parenthesis to this theological notation on Shakespeare is found here, in the logic of cause and effect between the disparity between the given knowledge of God’s nature and faulty human response (regarding proper or adequate “glorification” and “thankfulness”), on the one hand, and this “darkening” of “foolish hearts, on the other: God, he says, “handed them over” (*paredOken*; vv. 24, 26, 28) to their own “injustice” (*adikia*); the Creator leaves them to seek, to find, to express, to embody, and to become what they desire: in the tight progression of this passage, St. Paul looks on the human world from the post-Easter vantage point wherein the righteousness of God is revealed and that sets in greatest contrast the unrighteousness of humanity: as in antediluvian times (so crucial, we have seen, to the setting and symbolics of *King Lear*), the human experience is one that is marred by a descending progression: darkness is “exchanged” for light, dishonor for honor, vanity for glory, ignorance for knowledge, lie for the truth, anarchic eroticism for love, and ultimately, idolatry for right worship. How to explain—in light of the confession of a good Creator—this raging turmoil of the human nations, the vast injustices, the countless acts of brutality, and the deep inhumanity of it all? St. Paul provides a principle: “Even as they did not like to retain God in knowledge, God gave them over (*paredOken*) to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient; Being filled with all unrighteousness . . . ” (vv. 28–29) Humanity thereby becomes corrupted; the Apostle believes he has here identified the root of the entire human problem: idolatry is the act through which humanity obfuscates the founding knowledge of God within. Coordinated with this root problem of idolatry, reciprocally, wrath (*orgE*) itself is essentially the product of human manufacture, the bitter fruit that grows naturally (or rather, unnaturally) out of the human tree itself. It is the effect wholly contained implicitly in the human causes that bring it about. The fruit of an evil action is principally the evil action itself. Divine wrath is (paradoxically) humanity’s own act, inasmuch as a human is left to the devices it has chosen by the God who truly gives free creatures possession of their own ends; the punishment is the deed itself, as it unfolds from itself. Hell, one could nearly say, is, according to this principle of divine “giving over,” a product of human making.

“Professing themselves to be wise,” says the Apostle summarizing the point, “they became fools” (v. 22). And something like that is precisely the Bard’s theme here. Shakespeare’s *Lear* exemplifies this “being handed over” to madness as the proper fruit of folly. For there is a first, or primary correlation, a *convenientia* or fittingness between *Lear*’s original foolish action and the train of his

descent into madness.³³ There is biblical precedent again here: in the Book of Daniel the King of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, was judged by God for his pride in declaring the work of the God of Israel to be his own: the elevation of his kingdom over other kingdoms of the world, and of himself over other kings.³⁴ For seven years, he was locked in madness: “he was driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles’ feathers, and his nails like birds’ claws.”³⁵ Nebuchadnezzar’s madness subsides when he is capable of acknowledging the God of Israel, and not himself, as Lord of Lords, as King over all, whereas Lear’s madness subsides (In Act IV, Scene VII) when he awakes to find Cordelia before him, bearing no animosity for his actions, no condemnation (lines 65–67, 86). His sanity progressively returns as he acknowledges his own foolishness (lines 68–69, 96–97) and it is symbolized in his ability to recognize the face of Cordelia. King Nebuchadnezzar and King Lear share the correlation of madness with human folly and then with divine judgment or retribution, and they are similarly redeemed from it. Both become proximate with and even to startling degrees merge with the natural world, Nebuchadnezzar as a wild animal, and Lear as a raving wanderer in the mad storm. The correlation between human foolishness-madness (exemplified by the figure of the human king in both the Bible and in Shakespeare) and divine wrath is governed by the principle of *convenientia*, the name we may venture to give to the conceptual antinomy described above held together in the Biblical-Shakespearean symbolic unity of wrath-madness-wilderness: the fitting proportionality between foolishness and descent into madness (which *is*, as we saw, divine wrath in its human production) and its external manifestation in the wilderness and storm. One may go so far as to say that there is no divine wrath but in human madness and nature’s turmoil in the storm, which, together, manifest it. The paradoxical principle of *convenientia* at the heart of the theology we are discussing here—a heart that also beats, wildly, in this play—is the principle of a theological aesthetic at once biblical and Shakespearean.

2.4. The Fool’s Pragmatism. Kent’s Recapitulation of the Essential

We have just found ourselves broadsided by a massive conclusion, but there is more notation yet to be completed. Let us see if it may add anything further.

In response to Lear’s speech, his court fool, who earlier mocked him in his misfortune, tries, seemingly, to talk sense into him, to shake him from the grip of this *paredokic* (and *conveniens*) correlation of wrath and madness: “O nuncle, court holy water in a dry house is better than this rain-water out o’ door. Good nuncle,” he continues, “in, and ask thy daughters’ blessing; here’s a night pities neither wise man nor fool” (line 12). The fool speaks pragmatically, and without versification: where else will you go? You cannot stay out here in the storm. Of course, Lear does not take this path of attempted reconciliation with his betraying daughters for the sake of sheltering protection against exposure, both because of his pride and embarrassment at his folly, on the one hand, and because of his daughters’ astounding wickedness, on the other. (And he is correct: they will finally attempt to kill him and their sister.) The fool’s pragmatic counsel here is therefore no wisdom at all: gazing at the fool in line 12, Lear only looks in the mirror.

Now mixing blank verse with prose, slipping further into madness, Lear responds to the fool by steeling himself in his original position, giving himself over to the elements, calling himself the slave, not of his daughters, but of the powerful storm, and naming the two husbands of the daughters, the Dukes of Albany and Cornwall (one of whom, in the Quarto version, appears to assume his throne) as fully complicit schemers in his daughters’ scheming usurpations:

Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! spout, rain!

³³ For the theological underpinnings of this theme of *convenientia*, see Aidan Nichols, “Aesthetics in Augustine and Aquinas” (Nichols 2007, pp. 3–18).

³⁴ On this connection, see the comments of Maynard Mack, *King Lear in Our Time*. (Mack 1965, pp. 50–51, 62)

³⁵ Daniel 4:33.

Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire are my daughters:
 I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness;
 I never gave you kingdom, call'd you children,
 ... then, let fall Your horrible pleasure; here I stand, your slave,
 A poor, infirm, weak, and despis'd old man. (lines 13–19)

In binding himself to the fate being dealt out by the elements, whether wounding or destruction, he further acknowledges the justice of nature as the manifestation of divine wrath. In other words: by identifying himself with the theophanic display of the storm, he acknowledges the justice of the hand dealt him. He continues:

But yet I call you servile ministers,
 That have with two pernicious daughters join'd
 Your high-engender'd battles 'gainst a head
 So old and white as this. O! O! 'tis foul. (lines 20–23)

The dukes who through the duplicitous actions of Goneril and Regan come to inherit two halves of Lear's kingdom are seen as "servile ministers" of their wives against an old man: O! O! 'tis foul indeed to treat an elder, a father, a king in such a manner. But now faithful Kent enters the scene, wandering through the storm on the heath after his friend. Finding Lear with the fool, he utters the following lines:

Alas! sir, are you here? things that love night
 Love not such nights as these; the wrathful skies
 Gallow the very wanderers of the dark,
 And make them keep their caves. Since I was a man
 Such sheets of fire, such bursts of horrid thunder,
 Such groans of roaring wind and rain, I never
 Remember to have heard; man's nature cannot carry
 The affliction nor the fear. (lines 31–38)

These lines recapitulate the poetic imprecation exclaimed by Lear with which we, and the scene, began. We are reaching a rounded and fitting conclusion of the theological aesthetic at work in this part of the scene. In the second half of these lines (34–38), the same four elements are named (lightning, thunder, wind, and rain), as is the same destruction of human nature: "man's nature cannot carry/The affliction nor the fear" of the storm. What Lear has called for previously is now flatly observed in the storm by Kent. The first half of these lines (31–34), one could say, merely prepares for the recapitulation by emphatically stating the terribleness of the storm: not even things that normally haunt the night are out to brave such darkness. These "wrathful skies" terrify or frighten tremendously ("gallow") the kind of creatures that wander in the dark, causing them to "keep their caves" (line 34).

Is it possible that Kent is speaking of the human creature as such, in life a wanderer in the dark, who must, by necessity against the fierceness of the storm, find solace in the protection of the cave? Is Lear (perhaps like Nebuchadnezzar or Job) a symbol of humanity as such? Sanity leads one to protection, to "keep the cave," but Lear's paradigmatically human foolishness has rightly led to the situation of unprotected wandering, to the storm of wrath, and to madness. This is yet another paradox: to keep the cave (and we saw this above with Blumenberg) is to preserve the animal form of life, but to leave its protection for what comes is the source of human possibility, whether redemption or destruction, culture or devolution to a bestial state.

One may think that Shakespeare intends Kent to speak here of natural beings (nocturnal creatures like jackals or cats or possums) or spiritual beings (like ghosts or demons) as the "things that love night." But perhaps he speaks here of human beings as such, who normally love the night (in their foolishness) but are transpierced in fear and suffering by the dark stormy theophany, which is the quintessence of the night revealed, as madness is the disclosure of the heart of human folly. There

is—or rather, is there—a theodicy in play among the theological background of these lines? One that exposes the essence of the play, but on the surface, vaguely manifests itself through the parallelism of Kent and Lear's words.

3. Conclusions

Two scenes beyond that of the present notation, in III.4, the king, far descended into his madness, stumbles on the beggar Poor Tom (really Edgar, the young noble, in masquerade). Now Lear thinks he is encountering a philosopher. And he asks him the question that—if the aesthetical and theodical reading this notation has uncovered is correct—may hand us, in a single line, the central thematic node of the play: “What is the cause of thunder?” (line 155).³⁶ At the beginning of the play (I.1, I.4), Lear is self-assured that his kingship serves, one could say, as the keystone, the bridge, between the order of nature and human culture, guaranteeing justice—or rather, to express it more modestly, that justice is on his side. Yet the unfolding of the play dramatically betrays this. The journey through madness and back again, through divestiture of throne, and even clothing (in imitation of Poor Tom), naked in the wild and storm, without a home, and back, being covered by the Fool, and taking shelter in a hovel, eventually given new clothes, descent into the storm and out gives evidence of a justice that involves both nature and convention, and that is not a human possession: it afflicts and rescues; but it is not fully comprehensible. It certainly does not play in any privileged one's favor. But the storm passes, and human life in the ordered cosmos continues. And so the *natural* necessity of the incarnation of justice in the body of his office does not seem to preclude his human folly: no, it only makes it all the more terrible and tragic. The tragic dimension of Lear does not expose the great mystery of unfathomable necessities that control human fate, but rather places against the background of unfathomable nature the tiny figure of a man, his contingency, and the ungrounded, ungraspable, unmanipulatable necessity of his contingent cultural productions, all of which make him more than a beast. The only necessity is human conventionality, which is natural to humanity.³⁷

This question of convention and necessity, of cultural institution and nature, is another variation on the classical human question of the relation of nature and justice: how does the human order relate to the natural one? Does nature undergird the political order, underwriting its claims of justice? And like Plato in the *Cratylus*, where the conventional vs. natural debate about words is not resolved (for words *cannot* be but nevertheless *must* be in some unclear sense naturally related to the things they signify), the question is raised, problematized, and thrown into our faces. With *Lear*, we explore the paradox of a king who uses his absolute political power to wholly renounce that power. Is this exploration meant mockingly to expose the contradictions inherent within the classical identification of justice and nature, or does it expose the folly of a man's attempt to escape this order? The answer is neither clear nor obvious.³⁸ Rather, only the problem is. As Paul Cantor concludes: “[T]he pressure of events prevents [Lear] from ever fully digesting or integrating what he discovers about humanity on the heath.”³⁹

The philosophical anthropology of Hans Blumenberg with which I began teaches that ultimately our ever-advancing technological taming and utilizing of the world and its scientific objectivization, the gathering of the actual and possible transcendent realities into the ring of our subjectivity (at once expanding our conscious subjectivity and delimiting all transcendence into the new absolute sphere of immanence) that we term generally “enlightenment,” is grounded in permanent subjective limitation: all the world, the human world, is cast in our own *image*. Literal truth has a figurative ground;

³⁶ This is of course the very question that Strepsiades poses to Socrates in Aristophanes' *The Clouds*. See Paul Cantor's essay, “The Cause of Thunder: Nature and Justice in *King Lear*”. (Cantor 2008, pp. 231–52)

³⁷ This represents the general view of Shakespeare's entire corpus according to Terry Eagleton, *William Shakespeare*. (Eagleton 1986, pp. 77–81)

³⁸ By contrast to Jonathan Dollimore's view in, *Radical Tragedy*. (Dollimore 1984) Dollimore sees the text as determined by a politically subversive undercurrent.

³⁹ Paul Cantor, “The Cause of Thunder”. (Cantor 1989, p. 241)

metaphor is the “essence” of human knowledge. For Blumenberg, this is the way it has always been, only today we know it to be true. The anthropomorphism of our cosmos, its humanity explored in literature (both sacred and classic, of the Bible and of Shakespeare), is therefore valid. (I understate the point for modesty’s sake.) Blumenberg’s quasi-Nietzschean conclusion only underlines Immanuel Kant’s anthropological turn for which the world of sure objective knowledge, that of the sciences (fully replacing the dominant classical view of participatory illumination of the human mind in the divine mind as paradigm of knowledge), is founded on permanent, unchanging subjective categories that compose our mental machinery. In a way, then, Blumenberg’s contribution is only an intellectual doubling down of the Enlightenment itself—at least as Kant determined it. Yet, against Kant, who could only see symbols as vague allegorizations at the far edges of clear conceptuality,⁴⁰ for Blumenberg, metaphor is hardly a linguistic trope; it is the essence of human language and understanding because it is the first (and permanent) manner of mediating the overwhelming terror of a reality that has no final meaning that we are capable of grasping except in riddle and in enigma, meanings therefore that, in response to reality, we must project into it in order to survive.⁴¹ To say that the mind of a madman is a raging storm, to see the storm as the theophanic manifestation of divine retribution against an original and permanently present human foolishness, to see the correlation between the storm of divine retribution, therefore, and the madness of the human mind: to see and to experience an “enchanted” world, a world where symbol and image give inescapably give us, in their compact dense intelligibility, the deepest reality, is the *human* truth of the matter. But this correlation is of course the very problem that King Lear problematizes and explores.

The upshot of Blumenberg’s position is that metaphors in language, the metaphors that support and make possible our construction of *concepts*, our objectifications of transcendent reality into durable, consistent forms measured by our intellectual grasp itself, are signposts that point us in the direction of the truth of things. Metaphors get us closest to the truth of ourselves, of our world, and of God, which always eludes us.⁴² To see indirectly, is to see the most clearly. Clarity and distinctness, as normative ideals, are an illusion. “For now,” says St. Paul, “we see through a glass, darkly.”⁴³ A peculiarly *human* clarity is found, therefore, in the inspired wisdom of poetry. Let not the *convenientia* of all this be lost on us.

Blumenberg’s “metaphorological theory” may go some way in explaining why, for Shakespeare, it is the mad who fail to speak poetically, but only speak in mundane prose: the impossible but necessary correlation of nature and justice may identify the very essence of the human problem, but the humanity of our world, our sanity, depends on making it. And something bigger than humanity must be involved in underwriting it. This is both madness and wisdom. It is the dramatic correlations that this theological notation has sought to become familiar with, that expose, albeit critically, the clasp of enchantment grounding humanity in the cosmic order, intensified through poetification and its waxing and waning through the play. This may give us a vague intuition of the deeper divine reaches touched by our tragic humanity. Justice is divine, and only then human, fully human. But it is the otherworldly charity of Cordelia, transcending nature and culture, but also at their deepest heart, that alone can manifest such a justice. Aesthetics and theodicy, or rather charity and the justice of wrath are one. At the far end of human folly perhaps we may come to realize this, if at all.⁴⁴

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

⁴⁰ See the *Critique of Judgment* § 59, trans. Werner S. Pluhar. (Kant 1987, pp. 225–ff)

⁴¹ Blumenberg echoes (unwittingly or wittingly?) the biblical theme of humanity as the *imago Dei*, with a vocation to rule and master the wild, unruly world, turning the wilderness into a fruitful garden, recapitulating, thereby, the creator God’s original act of dividing and mastering the primal chaos.

⁴² See Eberhard Juengel, “Metaphorical Truth,” the first chapter of *Theological Essays*. (Juengel 2014)

⁴³ I Corinthians 13:12.

⁴⁴ John Hughes makes the “demystification of [worldly] power” and the “remystification,” “decommodification” and “re-enchantment” of charity the center of his radical political-theological reading of the text. See “The Politics of Forgiveness: A Theological Exploration of *King Lear*”. (Hughes 2001, pp. 261–87)

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