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EDGAR'S DOVER CLIFF SPEECH AND TRAGIC SEXUALITY

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One of the great bravura passages in Shakespearean drama, Edgar's spectacular recreation of the view from Dover Cliff has, for many viewers, captured the essence of the tragic experience in *King Lear*. A brief examination of this claim provides a context for appreciating the new reading offered by this essay. We might begin by noting that, in the early acts of the play, visual metaphor regularly conveys relative depths of intellectual or spiritual insight. "See better, Lear, and let me still remain/ The true blank of thine eye," Kent replies to Lear's command "Out of my sight" (I. i. 157-59).[1] "I will look further into 't" (I. iv. 71), Lear says regarding Goneril's servants' coldness toward him and his knights. "How far your eyes may pierce I cannot tell" (I. iv. 345), Albany tells Goneril, who has just dispossessed her father. "Thou canst tell why one's nose stands i'th' middle on's face?" the Fool asks Lear. "No," the latter replies; "Why, to keep one's eyes of either side's nose, that what a man cannot smell out, he may spy into" (I. v. 19-23). These and similar remarks establish the relative depth of visual perception as the play's chief metaphor for moral or intellectual wisdom.[2] Edgar's Dover Cliff speech represents the culmination of this pattern of visual perception as moral insight.

Edgar's dazzling poetry draws us to an imagined height, where, along with blind Gloucester, we regard (in our mind's eye) a tremendous scene with a common center upon which depth lines artistically appear to converge:[3]

> Come on, sir, here's the place; stand still. How fearful
> And dizzy 'tis, to cast one's eyes so low!
> The crows and choughs that wing the midway air
> Show scarce so gross as beetles. Half way down
> Hangs one that gathers sampire, dreadful trade!
> Methinks he seems no bigger than his head.
> The fishermen that [walk] upon the beach
> Appear like mice; and yond tall anchoring bark,
> Diminish'd to her cock; her cock, a buoy
> Almost too small for sight. The murmuring surge,
> That on th' unnumb'red idle pebble chafes,
> Cannot be heard so high. I'll look no more,

> Lest my brain turn, and the deficient sight
> Topple down headlong.
>
> (IV. vi. 11-24)

In this speech, Edgar's images are generally comparisons: the crows and choughs present themselves *as* beetles; the fishermen appear *like* mice. And yet strong identity-forging powers are also at work in the passage. A demeaning fall occurs with an accompanying lessening of value; the "tall" ("proud," "noble") bark abruptly becomes a small boat and the boat a minuscule navigational aid—almost beyond the range of vision.[4] By means of Edgar's poetic perspective, Shakespeare metaphorically reflects the impression registered elsewhere in the play of mankind's shrinking status. When Gloucester says, "I'th' last night's storm I such a fellow saw,/ Which made me think a man a worm" (IV. i. 32-33), he reveals a newly acquired inward vision of mankind for which Edgar's Dover Cliff speech provides the symbolic correlative. For Lear as well as for Gloucester, terrible suffering develops an awareness of the sorrowful human condition. Understood metaphorically, Edgar's lessening perspective redescribes Lear's tragic education on the heath, in which mankind, that glorious creature, shrinks until he becomes "a poor, bare, fork'd animal"—"the thing itself" (III. iv. 106-08).

Not surprisingly, Edgar's Dover Cliff perspective reflects other values inherent in Lear's tragic experience. For example, Lear's decline into madness yields his precious insights into the nature of justice and authority (IV. vi. 149-66). This paradox within the tragedy of *King Lear* is represented in Edgar's image of the samphire gatherer, hanging perilously by a rope halfway down the sheer cliff. That image reminds us that the gatherer of a rarity (here a medicinal herb) must bravely take risks and make the descent.[5] From Edgar's (and our) perspective, the gatherer's being concentrates in his head (l. 16), even as Lear's progressively does as he abandons the trappings of royalty and the outward reverence due his person and displays his profound reason-in-madness.[6] Nonetheless, the ultimate nothingness at the end of the tragic descent exists; the "idle" pebble at the cliff's base is "unnumb'red"—uncounted and hence unregarded and meaningless, unmoved and hence part of no dynamic, possibly redemptive world. Thus mankind recoils, fearing that a consideration of both the literal and metaphoric perspective opened up by Edgar's speech and the play as a whole will result in madness as well as blindness. A great perspective—that offered by the view from Dover Cliff and by *King Lear* as a whole—challenges mankind's capacities for perceiving, for

understanding, only to drive him terrified within himself by demonstrating some dark facts not only about the human condition but also about the inherent weakness of the senses through which he dimly grasps truths about unaccommodated man.

Despite the thoroughness of interpretive efforts, a surprising feature of Edgar's speech has eluded critical commentary. No one—to my knowledge—has explained how Edgar's description indirectly illuminates Regan and Goneril's self-destructive sexuality. It is worth noting that Shakespeare explicitly evokes the idea of male sexuality in Edgar's term for the bark's small boat. By making the tall ("proud") bark feminine,[7] Shakespeare transposes that sexuality when Edgar coins an oxymoronic, hermaphroditic term for the bark's dinghy ("her cock").[8] Moreover, in the sixteenth-century, possibly both "buoy" and "boy" were homophones with the common spelling "boy" (*OED* "Buoy" #1);[9] in this respect, the Jacobean actor's pronunciation of the phrase "her cock, a buoy" may have reinforced (by renaming) the masculine value of "cock" and thus intensified the total phrase's potential for hermaphroditic meaning.[10] While Eric Partridge and E. A. M. Colman (among others) have extensively documented the bawdy pun in Shakespearean drama, a more subtle sexual wordplay, often created by the conflated meaning of proximate words, has not received equal attention. And yet Frankie Rubenstein has recently demonstrated that the less obvious, more finely subtle kind of Shakespearean bawdy is present throughout the canon. *Love's Labour's Lost* provides a representative example of the ingenuity behind this kind of bawdy:

> *Boyet.* I was as willing to grapple as he was to board.
> *Kath.* Two hot sheeps, marry.
> *Boyet.* And wherefore not ships?
>
> (II. i. 218-19)

Concerning these lines, Rubenstein remarks that Boyet's interlocutor "chooses to hear the two nautical terms GRAPPLE and BOARD as puns on the coital mounting or boarding of two knaves, two SHIPS (L. *naves*); and compares the men to two hot sheep, in sexual heat or oestrus. Boyet asks why she changed his metaphor, since ships, too, MARRY, i.e. Fr. *marer*, moor, get tied or fastened" (p. 238). The nautical nature of such sexual wordplay becomes a precedent for that of *Lear*.[11] Nonetheless, one of Isabella's speeches in *Measure for Measure*, unchronicled by the previously mentioned compilers, contains the kind of conflated sexual wordplay that we hear in a more condensed form in Edgar's speech. Explaining how as a

novitiate she would bribe Angelo to save her brother Claudio's life, Isabella states,

> Not with fond sicles of the tested gold,
> Or stones, whose rate is either rich or poor
> As fancy values them; but with true prayers....
> (II. ii. 149-51)

Bertrand Evans glosses "sicles" as "shekels, i.e. coins" (p. 561), presumably Isabella's intended meaning. In the sexually repressed imagination of Angelo, however, Isabella's words "sicles" and "tested" conflate to "testicles," mainly because her subsequent word "stones" (by which she means "jewels") was a familiar Renaissance euphemism for "testicles." For a fleeting moment, Angelo hears a different message in Isabella's words. This subtle kind of bawdy pervades Shakespeare's works, substantiating the analysis of sexual wordplay in Edgar's Dover Cliff speech.

Winfried Schleiner, in her analysis of Edgar's speech, describes a dramatic principle of "sequential understanding which involves a reinterpretation in terms of a negation" (pp. 340-41). For example, Edgar mentions the noise of the surf only to deny that it can be heard from the cliff's top: "The murmuring surge,/ That on th' unnumb'red idle pebble chafes,/ Cannot be heard so high." Schleiner argues that Edgar's statement "thus requires a sequential understanding, with the third line in some sense taking away what has been asserted before." Granted Schleiner's principle, we hear the utterance "yond tall anchoring bark,/ Diminish'd to her cock; her cock, a buoy," interpret the words in straightforward nautical terms, and then reinterpret in light of a negation when we realize, on another level, that a feminine entity cannot possess the feature attributed to it. Of all the play's characters. Edgar's phrase "her cock, a buoy" best fits Regan and Goneril. Like the surf which can and cannot be heard, Regan and Goneril during the course of the play seem to possess and not to possess a physical trait stereotypic of their idea of power.

A forerunner of Lady Macbeth and Dionyza, Goneril appropriates in *King Lear* the cliché male characteristic of ruthlessness; she does so in part by foisting traditionally non-masculine epithets upon her husband Albany. When Albany objects to Goneril's harsh treatment of Lear, she protests:

> This milky gentleness and course of yours
> Though I condemn not, yet, under pardon,
> [You] are much more [attax'd] for want of wisdom

Than prais'd for harmful mildness.

(I. iv. 341-44)

Later in the play, hearing that a morally awake Albany openly castigates her cruelty, Goneril mistakenly blames his protest upon timidity. "I must change names at home, and give the distaff/ Into my husband's hands" (IV. ii. 17-18), she scornfully tells her lover-to-be Edmund. By calling Albany "milk-liver'd" (IV. ii. 50), Goneril indicts her husband for failing to measure up to her stereotype of courageous manhood. Cordelia's bravery in remaining alone in Britain with France's army sufficiently reveals the limitations inherent in Goneril's cliché of gender. In fact, as Oswald reported, Albany is marvelously changed into a dynamic foe of vice (IV. ii. 3-11).[12] Incarnating the brutal will that Regan and Goneril admire, Edmund belongs to the sexual gender that the sisters arbitrarily identify with savage force—the gender that each woman unconsciously yearns to incorporate somehow within herself. That each sister should desire to make Edmund hers thus should not surprise the viewer. In their fatal courtship of Edmund, both sisters assume the stereotypic masculine role of wooing a passive love object—a passive beloved ironically, painfully at odds with the ravager each hopes to possess (and herself become). With poetic justice, each sister's adoption of the aggressive behavior that she admires converts assertive Edmund into the polar opposite of her idea of desirable manhood.

Moreover, Regan and Goneril's simplistic reduction of Edmund's identity to his male sexuality echoes the play's opening with a fierce irony; there, an embarrassed but callous Gloucester defines his bastard son for Kent mainly in terms of the dehumanizing "sport" attending his adulterous conception. In his Dover Cliff speech, Edgar reformulates this reduction of value so that we predict the reduction's tragic outcome. By speaking of "yond tall anchoring bark,/ Diminish'd to her cock; her cock, a buoy/ Almost too small for sight," Edgar reminds us that Regan and Goneril have staked their lives on something that they do not (and never will) possess. In truth, the sisters' unnatural desires make them ripe for death—for nothingness. The sexual jealousy fueling Regan's poisoning and Goneril's suicide testifies to the force of the backlash of female feelings long repressed and denied; overwhelmed by jealousy over the "other woman," Goneril manifests a stereotypic female identity—one which literally destroys her twisted version of a male woman.

The complex suggestion inherent in Edgar's metaphor thus validates Lear's awful curse on Goneril:

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> Hear, Nature, hear, dear goddess, hear!
> Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
> To make this creature fruitful.
> Into her womb convey sterility,
> Dry up in her the organs of increase,
> And from her derogate body never spring
> A babe to honor her!
>
> (I. iv. 275-81)

By choosing to express their sexuality as vicious power rather than as parenthood, Regan and Goneril ironically fulfill Lear's curse. "The organs of increase" designed for perpetuity become, in Regan and Goneril's distorted thinking, emblematic of the brutal means for acquiring material possessions and land—"increase" in the quantitative sense often deadly in *King Lear*.[13] In a more general sense, Edgar's metaphor of sexual reduction reflects all the play's accounts of self-destructive sexuality—from the Fool's song about "the codpiece that will house/ Before the head has any" (III. ii. 27-28)[14] through Tom O'Bedlam's story of lust driving a servingman to insanity (III. iv. 85-100) to mad Lear's vivid portrayal of the stinking venereal pit below an angelic countenance (IV. vi. 118-31).[15] In short, Edgar's reductive metaphor reminds us of the Fall—both those of Lear's hard-hearted daughters and of Gloucester ("The dark and vicious place where thee he got/ Cost him his eyes"). And since Lear fathered the terrible children who seek his life, he too qualifies for inclusion in the list of characters subject to Edgar's metaphor. While one could argue that Gloucester's and Lear's falls prove "fortunate" in the ethical insights attending their suffering, the fact that their deaths can be ultimately traced to deeds of sexuality certainly qualifies the value of gained wisdom. The beginning of Gloucester's and Lear's ends can be found in the most familiar consequence of original sin—corrupt sexuality.

In summary, Edgar's image of bark/cock/buoy appears to be yet another instance of Shakespeare's remarkable ability to condense an ideational macrocosm in a poetic microcosm. Such compression seems incidental to characterization, or to a character's imagined motives for speaking. The phenomenon most likely amounts to creative sparks thrown off in the white heat of inspired composition—a brilliant poetic effect of which Shakespeare himself may not have been fully aware. Nonetheless, it often adds to both our understanding and enjoyment of a particular play, constituting a legitimate topic of study in Shakespeare's art.

NOTES

[1]All quotations from *King Lear* are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston, 1974).

[2]For an exhaustive analysis of visual imagery in the tragedy, see Robert Heilman, *This Great Stage: Image and Structure in "King Lear"* (1948; rpt. Seattle, 1963), pp. 41-64.

[3]For other discussions of Edgar's poetic creation of the view from Dover Cliff, see Harry Levin, "The Heights and the Depths: A Scene from *King Lear*," *More Talking of Shakespeare*, ed. John Garrett (London, 1959), pp. 96-100; Waldo F. McNeir, "The Staging of the Dover Cliff Scene in *King Lear*," *Studies in English Renaissance Literature*, ed. Waldo F. McNeir (Baton Rouge, 1962), pp. 87-104; Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto, 1962), pp. 15-18, 74-75; Alvin B. Kernan, "Formalism and Realism in Elizabethan Drama: The Miracles in *King Lear*," *Ren D*, 9 (1966), 59-66, esp. 61-63; Richard Fly, *Shakespeare's Mediated World* (Amherst, 1976), pp. 93-95; David Kaula, "Edgar on Dover Cliff: An Emblematic Reading," *ESC*, 5 (1979), 377-387; Guy Butler, "Shakespeare's Cliff at Dover and an Emblem Illustration," *HLQ*, 47 (1984), 2262-31; Michael E. Mooney, "'Edgar I Nothing Am': 'Figurenposition' in *King Lear*," *ShS*, 38 (1985), 160-161; and Winfried Schleiner, "Justifying the Unjustifiable: The Dover Cliff Scene in *King Lear*," *SQ*, 36 (1985), 337-343.

[4]In *Through the Vanishing Point: Space in Poetry and Painting* (New York, 1968), Marshall McLuhan and Harley Parker identify five receding planes of vision in Edgar's speech: Plane 1—"crows and choughs"; Plane 2—"halfway down"; Plane 3—"the fishermen"; Plane 4—"and yond tall anchoring bark"; Plane 5—"her cock, a buoy" (p. 75). McLuhan and Parker remark that this "formal perspective in *Lear* is presented as a very unpleasant experience—the breaking out of the warm, familiar multi-sensory space into fragmented visual space." For more on the perspectivism of Edgar's speech, see John B. Bender, *Spenser and Literary Pictorialism* (Princeton, 1972), pp. 95-98.

[5]Kenneth Muir, in his New Arden edition of *King Lear* (London, 1952), glosses samphire as "an aromatic plant used for pickles" (p. 170). David Kaula, in "Edgar on Dover Cliff: An Emblematic Reading," underscores the rarity of the herb samphire by explaining its association with St. Peter (*herbe de Saint Pierre*). Its considerable medicinal properties were described by the herbalist John Gerarde in *The Herball or General Historie of Plantes* (1597). See Kaula, pp. 379-380. The medical connotations of samphire (unlike the preservative ones) suggest an analogy with the risk involved and the costs in addressing human vulnerability—a motif of *King Lear*.

[6]See Heilman, pp. 173-222.

[7]Shakespeare's characters frequently use "bark" as a metaphor for the human body (*3H6* V. v. 25-28; *R3* III. vii. 161-62; *Tro.* I. i. 101-04), on occasion the female body (*R3* IV. iv. 230-35; *Rom.* III. v. 130-37).

[8]That "cock" sometimes carries the modern meaning of "penis" in Shakespeare's plays is documented by Eric Partridge, *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (New York, 1969), p. 80; and by E. A. M. Colman, *The Dramatic Use of Bawdy in Shakespeare* (London, 1974), pp. 39, 188.

[9]Also see Fausto Cercignani, *Shakespeare's Works and Elizabethan Pronunciation* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 244-247, esp. p. 245.

[10]Frankie Rubenstein, in *A Dictionary of Shakespeare's Sexual Puns and Their Significance* (London, 1984), notes that in Shakespeare's plays "boy" sometimes carries the burden of passive homosexual (pp. 32-33). This dimension of the word interacts with "cock" in the utterance "her cock, a buoy" to intensify the paradoxical sexuality of the phrase. In this sense, "her" masculinity, her "cock," is really not ordinarily understood masculinity at all but the homosexual substitute for the female pudendum. As we shall see, this paradoxical reading of the phrase (a conflating of male and female) especially applies to Goneril and Regan's complex sexuality.

[11]For Shakespeare's sexual quibbles on nautical terms, see especially Stephen Booth, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven, 1977), pp. 273-274 (80. 5-13); pp. 391-392 (116); p. 474 (137. 6). For sexual joking on "boat" and "leak" in *Lear*, see III. vi. 25-28.

[12]Warren Stevenson, in "Albany as Archetype in *King Lear*," *MLQ*, 26 (1965), 257-263, summarizes the critical history of the stereotypically non-masculine Albany (pp. 257-58) before describing the character's sudden conversion at the beginning of IV. ii into a determined, active revenger of evil. By V. ii, Albany has assumed the traditional male role of warrior while his wife Goneril has been overcome by scarcely manageable sexual feelings that, in her cold, mechanical efficiency, she has long repressed. Leo Kirshbaum also stresses Albany's initial weakness and later conversion into a strong character in "Albany," *ShS*, 13 (1960), 20-29.

[13]An interesting, detailed account of the birth and growth of evil in Goneril and Regan is given by Stephen Reid, "In Defense of Goneril and Regan," *AI*, 27 (1970), 226-244.

[14]John F. Danby explicates the self-destructive sexuality in the Fool's song (III. ii. 25-36) in *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature: A Study of "King Lear"* (1948; rpt. London: Faber and Faber, 1961), pp. 110-12. Danby notes that the "Rake's Progress" condensed in the Fool's song "is repeated, of course, in Poor Tom—the courtier whose vices had just been those that set the wheel turning and who becomes a naked Bedlamite" (p. 111).

[15]Destructive sexuality in the tragedy has been generally analyzed by Robert H. West, "Sex and Pessimism in *King Lear*," *SQ*, 11 (1960), 55-60; and by Colman, pp. 126-131.