Near the end of Act II of William Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, the irate king solicits the aid of his second daughter, Regan, in his power struggle with eldest daughter, Goneril, expressing his confidence that “Thou better know’st / The offices of nature, bond of childhood, / Effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude.” That he can so easily expect a speedy redress of the abuses suffered at the hands of Goneril as payment of these “dues” is underwritten by the fact that “Thy half o’ the kingdom hast thou not forgot, / Wherein I thee endowed” (2.4.175-179). The two halves of this desperate assertion each represent conflicting modes of relation to the world which, stretched out in a tension within the tortured character of Lear, propel him toward his tragic fate. Occupying the juncture between what Adorno and Horkheimer, in their essay, *The Concept of Enlightenment*, call myth and enlightenment—also referred to here as the intuitive and calculative appropriation of the world—Lear remains blind to this distinction as it exists in both himself and the courtly world surrounding him. Such blindness allows him to make the juxtaposition he does in the lines quoted above, for it is only by failing to perceive the eclipse of intuitive thought in the rise of enlightenment that he is able to assume that his status as sovereign could persist when all material basis for its maintenance in the court has been relinquished. Before this calamitous juncture can be completely laid bare, however, it is necessary to look at what comes before and after in order to understand, along with the Fool,

1 References are to act, scene, and line(s).
how exactly it is that Lear “hast pared thy wit o’ both sides, and nothing left i’ the middle” (1.4.180).

For Adorno and Horkheimer, enlightenment is the destruction of myth by means of the progress of thought, a movement in which “the multiplicity of mythical figures [is] reduced to a single common denominator, the subject.” ² Whereas mythical understanding exercises its power in the world by establishing relations of kinship and lines of occult influence between fundamentally unfathomable entities, enlightenment aims to constitute the total world-immanence of thought, and as such,

stands in the same relationship to things as the dictator to human beings. He knows them to the extent that he can manipulate them…Their ‘in-itself’ becomes ‘for him.’ In their transformation the essence of things is revealed as always the same, a substrate of domination. This identity constitutes the unity of nature… [the] modest hunting ground [of] the unified cosmos, in which nothing exists but prey. ³

In other words, enlightenment excludes precisely the basic inscrutability of the particular essence or spirit on which the mythical understanding of things is based. Against irreducible difference in the intuitive, metaphorical language of myth it posits absolute identity in the measured, reductive terms of rationalistic theory: “For enlightenment, anything which does not conform to the standard of calculability and utility must be viewed with suspicion.” ⁴ Metaphor and metonymy are banished to the realm of falsehood while generalizing concepts and quantifiable properties become the supreme instruments of imperial enlightenment. The

³ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Enlightenment, 6.
⁴ Ibid., 3.
kinship that was once attained with and between things is replaced by the subject’s increasing distance from its objects and its subsequent narcissistic recruitment and measured reduction of these things to its retinue of subordinate functionaries. Enlightenment dissolves kinship relations and constitutes the alienated subject as the nexus of objective power relations.

That Lear’s kingdom is already in the grip of enlightenment is apparent from the start of the play, where Kent and Gloucester discuss which of the two dukes, Albany and Cornwall, have better secured the king’s favor. The opening exchange suggests a change has taken place in the king, for although, according to Kent, “the king had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall,” Gloucester observes that “[i]t did always seem so to us; but now, in the division of the kingdom, it appears not which of the dukes he values most; for equalities are so weighed, that curiosity in neither can make choice of either’s moiety” (1.1.1-6). Considering the later developments in the play, it is clear that Lear’s initial evaluation, as reported by Kent, was the correct one. Cornwall turns out to be one of the most vicious antagonists in the play, while Albany remains loyal to the king throughout and is decisive in the effort to defeat the conspiratorial triumvirate of Goneril, Regan, and Edmund. However, with the decision to divide up the kingdom and cede the throne to his progeny, Lear seems to have lost the certainty of his initial evaluation and fallen into extreme error.

The reason for this change can be deduced from the subsequent contest he initiates between his daughters. The politically insupportable decision to divide the kingdom according to the results of a contest in which his daughters offer frivolous, though perhaps eloquent, professions of love, along with his ferocious emotional instability in the opening scene, suggests that the sensibility of the aging king, upon which intuition is based, is beginning to deteriorate.
His sensual degeneration leads to a state of alienation that necessitates the deployment of transparent, easily surveyable signs by which one can orient oneself in an increasingly unfamiliar world; where one’s bearing have been lost, one searches for the words by which to orient oneself. The loss of any intuitive grasp of the world is thus supplemented by the theoretical formulation and its spurious objectivity. Suddenly, the function of language shifts: it no longer simply attends relations between things that always exceed the signs used to designate them, but is now used to subtend things, determining them in the single, authoritative relation to a dominating subject. Only self-love—not paternal love, which respects the individuality of the child—speaks in the question: “Which of you shall we say doth love us most?” (1.1.50, my emphasis); only a subject alienated from the system of relations (in this case, the relations of his family and its extension in the court) in which it was originally constituted could ask such a question. In a word, the king has regressed; what exactly does this mean?

By apportioning his kingdom to his daughters according to their measured linguistic expressions, Lear disregards any integral, intuitive apprehension of his daughters’ love that could be available to him as their father and exchanges it for the momentary convenience of the formulaic utterance. Likewise, he discounts the impressions accrued through his previous experience with his son-in-laws and the affections they engendered in favor of a more “objective” test in the competition between his daughters. In both cases, bonds of kinship and the intuitive relations on which they are based are ignored in favor of the competition. A true exemplar of enlightenment, he sees foremost the utility of his contrivance, which he employs so that “future strife may be prevented now” (1.1.43-44). But like Adorno and Horkheimer’s
“wholly enlightened earth,” Lear’s contrivance thrusts his kingdom into a state of “triumphant calamity.”

Robert Heilman observes that the play centers thematically on the “errors of understanding” to which its protagonists fall victim. In the case of the king, this error involves the misapplication of a calculative standard where only intuitive insight can prevail: “[Lear] insists upon the untenable proposition that love can be measured, as if it were a material quantum of a certain size or shape. In his intellectual confusion he forgets that deeds rather than words are signs of love.” In real, living relationships, love is something for which words have significance only when uttered within a much larger symbolic context of actions that immediately demonstrate love. The proof of love that Lear demands so suddenly and willfully of his daughters should have been built up over the years through his everyday, paternal relations with them. Instead, “Lear shirks a demanding task—the imaginative apprehension of symbols, we all know, is not easy—and seeks a rationalistic way out.” It is important to note that, within the context of enlightenment, it is somewhat misleading to speak of this rationalist shift, along with Heilman, as a voluntary evasion of duty. Rather, such a shift is itself internal to the historical movement of enlightenment, which compels its representatives inevitably and inexorably towards this regressive culmination. Thus Lear’s “error” is not actively chosen, but passively undertaken as an unconscious imperative. Nevertheless, by asking for an objective expression of his daughters’ love, Lear wishes to accrue to himself, as the sovereign subject of power, the perpetual sign of devotion under which his sovereignty can be preserved. For

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7 Robert B. Heilman, “Unity of *King Lear,”* 155.
although “we will divest us, both of rule, interest of territory, cares of state,” nevertheless “we still retain the name, and all the additions to a king” (1.1.48-49, 136-137). What he fails to realize is that, with this move, he compromises his entire kingdom.

Of course as king, Lear has always been a representative of enlightenment. In his role, it is necessary to subsume countless individuals in his realm under the general classifications or divisions of labor through which he exercises sovereignty. Reading Odysseus in terms of enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer write:

A property owner like Odysseus ‘controls from a distance a numerous, finely graded personnel of ox herds, shepherds, swineherds, and servants. In the evening, having looked out from his castle to see the countryside lit up by a thousand fires, he can go to his rest in peace. He knows that his loyal servants are watching to keep away wild animals and to drive away thieves from the enclosure which they are to protect.’

The successful command at a distance of this “finely graded personnel” by means of general concepts that classify and impose specific functions is necessary both for the preservation of power in reality and for the creation of the logical categories that, through long use in the real exercise of power, acquire a transcendental quality that becomes characteristic of enlightened thought. Thus represented by all those functionaries integrated into his extended network of command, a certain positive capacity for enlightened thought is implied by Lear’s immense power as king. But when these categories—which both presuppose and reproduce distance between the sovereign and his subject—are turned back upon the royal court, particularly Lear’s daughters, the product is not progress, but regression. “A consequence of the restriction

of thought to organization and administration, rehearsed by those in charge from artful Odyssey to artless chairmen of the board, “with Lear somewhere in the middle, “is the stupidity which afflicts the great as soon as they have to perform tasks other than the manipulation of the small.” The endowment of an entire kingdom is one of these “other” tasks, a comprehensive decision requiring not merely shrewdness but imagination, and so in his attempt to administrate as if the problem of division were merely a matter of stocktaking, Lear quickly becomes the fool. His loss of sensibility—his regression—is therefore not due to the senility of old age, as some critics and directors have suggested, but to the conceptual senility into which the ruler is thrust by overlong use of the principles of command, leading to radical alienation, the degeneration of sense and intellect, and their reproduction in the court surrounding him.

The two exceptions to this general state of affairs in the court are Cordelia and Kent. Whereas Goneril and Regan both respond to Lear’s game of measurement with their own well-measured speeches, Cordelia and Kent refuse to accept Lear’s generalization of the principles of command and their projection onto the court that sustains and reproduces his sovereignty. She is, after all, not his subject, but his kin, his very own flesh and blood. But when he says to Cordelia, “what can you say to draw a third more opulent than your sisters? Speak” (1.1.85-86), he has already distanced himself from her in order to leverage his own future power. By promising the largest dowry to the daughter who expresses the most love, he retains for himself, at least according to his questionable calculations, the greatest degree of liberty for himself: the most loving daughter would, in theory, allow him the greatest latitude even after

he has relinquished the “sway” of the throne. Lear thus sets up a specious exchange between love and power, and in this enterprise unwittingly squanders both. “Human beings purchase the increase in their power with estrangement from that over which it is exerted”\(^{10}\); consequently, this narcissistic attitude renders him unreceptive to metaphorical utterances that rely for their own force on the strength of kinship relations that necessarily exceed the terms of the competition. Thus when Cordelia replies, with profound simplicity, “Nothing, my lord,” Lear is unable to grasp its profundity, and instead interprets it in its literal stupidity (1.1.87). She tries to awaken him from his mensurational slumber, invoking the forgotten terms of kinship—

“Good my lord, / You have begot me, bred me, loved me; I / Return those duties as they are right fit, / Obey you, love you, and most honor you” (1.1.95-98)—but to no avail. Nor does the fact that the hyperbolic expressions of Goneril and Regan cannot, by the very intensity of their hyperbole, obtain in reality reach the notice of the king. “Why have my sisters husbands, if they say they love you all?” asks Cordelia, recalling the level of palpable relations at which humans interact with one another in a game so far monopolized by her sisters’ high-flown abstractions.

She continues:

…Haply when I shall wed,
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
Half my love with him, half my care and duty.
Sure I shall never marry like my sisters,
To love my father all. (1.1.99-104)

Although her words radiate a truth (and a prescient irony), they fail to dispel the intellectual fog that has descended hopelessly upon her father’s court.

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 6.
Like Cordelia, Kent remains loyal to Lear, refusing to reproduce within himself the enlightened complacency that his deluded king fosters in the court. In his opposition to Lear at this juncture, Kent remains one of the king’s only true allies. Still bound to Lear by the bond of intimacy that develops between master and servant and acting within the duties of his kinship to the king as member of the court, Kent tries to reawaken the king to consciousness of his own duties as the court’s sovereign figure: “What wilt thou do old man? Think’st thou that duty shall have dread to speak, when power to flattery bows?” (1.1.147-149) In exchanging his own power for flattery, the king severs the relations that hold the court together, rending it apart and volatilizing the power that is based upon it. He no longer recognizes his own responsibilities as king and father, but rather makes self-serving and self-destructive demands.

In their discussion of the relation between master and servant in Lear, Barish and Waingrow reflect upon the extent to which Lear fails to extend the privileges implied by courtly service. “[I]deal service works two ways; it implies rights as well as duties, on each side…By refusing to honor the reciprocal force of the bond tying him to his inferiors,” whether servant or child, “Lear cuts the bond, ‘cracks’ it, and so lets loose the forces of disorder, division, and disservice that are to overwhelm the kingdom.”11 While they are right to identify the breakdown of service in the corruption of the court, they fail to recognize this as a mere symptom of a more fundamental crisis of enlightenment. For it is only in the breakdown of kinship relations and their intuitive correlates that the “rights” of service—set in a calculated equivalence with their corresponding “duties”—and the rigid social hierarchy on which they

are based can emerge as a formal possibility. From this point, there is nothing to prevent gradual extension of the distance between mutually isolated subjectivities from culminating in the eventual loss of the “rights” of service exemplified in the expulsion of Kent from the court.

As loyal advisor to the king, Kent maintains a relation to the king not merely of service, but of kinship. He exhibits this first by condemning the actions that threaten Lear’s sovereignty, but Lear makes the ironic and thoroughly ungracious mistake of interpreting Kent’s advice as a challenge to his sovereignty. Instead, Kent, like Cordelia, recognizes the artifice in the words of Goneril and Regan, and so repeatedly implores the king to “reverse thy doom” (1.1.150). Furthermore, he understands the deeper significance of Cordelia’s own reply, explaining that “thy youngest daughter does not love thee least; nor are those empty-hearted whose low sounds reverb no hollowness” (1.1.153-154); indeed, she “justly think’st, and most rightly said” (1.1.185). And though banished for this loyalty, Kent’s continued, covert service to the king as Caius demonstrates his freedom from Lear’s own “enlightened” error and his transcendence of the simple equivalency contained in Barish and Waingrow’s service ideal. As such, Kent remains one of the few hopes for the future reconstitution of the court and the king’s sovereignty, which, despite Kent’s warnings, is after the play’s first scene irrevocably lost.

By far the most damning aspect of Lear’s error is that, by severing the bonds of kinship through his institution of the contest, Lear rouses the egotism of his elder daughters against him. For although the truth of their professions is dependent on a filial relation and sense of duty to Lear that exceeds the language of their professions, this relation was severed in the very

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12 It is necessary to observe here that any attempt to reduce “kinship” to simple biological heredity would fall prey to the very same tendency of enlightened over-determination that Adorno and Horkheimer are submitting to critique.
institution of the competition. In other words, far from attaining truth, their professions are, in the midst of the contest, necessarily false, fundamentally absurd. Furthermore, there is no longer any reason for his daughters to trust him—“if our father carry such dispositions as he bears, this last surrender of his will but offend us” (1.1.304-306)—and, now endowed with real power, they are prepared to follow his enlightened lead and depose him as a threat to their own predominance. With this they become his legitimate heirs, and Lear’s regression is complete. “Lear’s tragic flaw is the whole being of Goneril and Regan. Lear makes a fatal error of understanding: then his essential method of thought is picked up by his daughters and made their way of life.”13 Because the “thing-like quality of the means, which makes the means universally available…it itself implies a criticism of the domination from which thought has arisen as its means,” Goneril and Regan (and to a lesser extent Cornwall and Edmund) are able to seize the king’s own mode of calculative reason and use it to persecute and utterly dispossess him.14 No longer constrained by the bonds of kinship, they are free to disregard the excesses of sovereignty and measure his needs as if he were no more than a common slave. In 2.4, as the sisters gradually pare down Lear’s host of knights, he finally comes to the full realization that his sovereignty is lost. His method of calculated dispensation has been wholly appropriated by his two daughters, and so he pleads with them, “O reason not the need!...Allow not nature more than nature needs, man’s life’s as cheap as beast’s.” At this point, the king is already dead, and only “a poor old man, as full of grief as age” remains (2.4.263-271). Goneril and Regan inherit “the spirit of calculation,” the king contrives his own ruin, and the court is dissolved.15

13 Robert B. Heilman, “The Unity of King Lear,” 159.
14 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Enlightenment, 29.
15 Robert B. Heilman, “Unity of King Lear,” 159.
One of the most obvious symptoms of the dissolution of the court and the king’s royal power is found in the reply given to Lear by one of his knights when asked about the king’s Fool: “Since the young lady’s going to France, sir, the fool hath much pined away” (1.4.72-73). As himself a symbol of the king’s sovereignty, he laments Cordelia’s departure because it is a consequence of the dissolution of the relations that constitute the royal family, and by extension the court. The father has set himself at a distance from his daughter, and the disruption of this fundamental relation implies the disruption of all others. Suddenly the distinction between Lear and the Fool breaks down, so that the latter can presume even to teach the former, addressing him with the familiar “sirrah.” However, despite this breakdown, the Fool is another figure that remains loyal to the king and tries to bring him to consciousness of his errors. His speech in 1.4 is particularly revealing:

Have more than thou showest,
Speak less than thou knowest,
Lend less than thou owest,
Ride more than thou goest,
Learn more than thou trowest,
Set less than thou throwest,
Leave a drink and thy whore,
And keep in-a-door,
And thou shalt have more,
Than two tens and a score. (1.4.115-124)

This speech, which the Fool “teaches” to Lear, reveals the nature of the newly enlightened world that Lear has brought into existence. The entire speech is a utilitarian refrain that underscores the calculative spirit of the enlightenment and its orientation towards accruing personal profit and power. It reflects the still unobserved eclipse of Lear’s sovereignty and his loss of the excesses (such as retaining a retinue of one-hundred knights) that always accompany
the rights of the king. By repeatedly designating the king as himself a “fool,” the king’s Fool slowly reveals to Lear the nature of his error, one that Lear originally perpetrates unconsciously. “Dost thou call me fool, boy?” asks Lear, and the Fool replies “All thy other titles thou hast given away; that thou wast born with.” Even Kent admits the Fool’s insight, commenting that “this is not altogether fool, my lord” (1.4.144-147). As characters that maintain their courtly relations with Lear both at this early stage and later on, after the king is banished from the thoroughly enlightened kingdom and thrust out onto the heath, Kent and the Fool form the loyal nucleus around which the king’s court will eventually be reconstituted. The significance of this loyalty and its difference from enlightened self-interest is made manifest in their respective fates, alongside that of Lear: the Fool is “hanged” (5.3.305); and Kent’s suicide after the death of Lear is strongly alluded to: “I have a journey sir, shortly to go; my master calls me, and I must not say no” (5.3.321-322).

The entire thematic of loyalty and disloyalty in kinship relations is mirrored in the Gloucester subplot of Lear. Kinship relations break down due to the abstracted enlightenment of the paternal figure, and the projection of this attitude onto a subversive child leads to a tragic conclusion. Gloucester’s preoccupation with astrology marks him as a figure of late enlightenment, for whom the principles of domination have become reified in the movements of heavenly bodies. Therefore he is always reading—measuring—his best advantage in these movements, and making the necessary adjustments to his conduct according to them. In this way, he succumbs to what Adorno and Horkheimer call “the fake myth of fascism,” in which “not merely are qualities dissolved in thought, but human beings are forced into real
conformity.” He reduces his individuality to a function of cosmic power as a passive correlate to his king, whose folly, it should be mentioned, receives no censure from Gloucester as he plunges headlong towards destruction. Being cast in the same mold of enlightenment, he remains as blind to the king’s error as Lear himself.

Unable to “understand what is implied in the situations in which he finds himself, even though he feels worldlywise enough,” Gloucester also falls into the same error of misrecognition with regard to his own children. Like Lear, he fails to rely on his own intuitive judgment regarding his own relations of kinship with his children. Instead, he relies on abstract astrological principles. Thus, when Edmund betrays his older brother by counterfeiting a letter in which he threatens Gloucester’s life, Gloucester does not defer to his own personal knowledge of his sons. It is a terrible folly, for everything that Shakespeare reveals about Edgar shows that he is, and suggests that he always has been, an ideal son. For Gloucester to simply accept Edmund’s admittedly subtle accusations is a terrible omission. Rather than confronting Edgar and thereby reestablishing a direct, intuitive relation through which he could potentially espy the truth of the matter, he simply assumes its truth because it is consistent with astrological signs: “These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good…This villain of mine comes under the prediction; there’s son against father. The king falls from bias of nature; there’s father against child” (1.2.103-106). Meanwhile, Edmund appropriates the spirit of enlightenment for himself, disclaiming his kinship relations through his multiple betrayal and initiating a Machiavellian grab for power: “Let me if not by birth have lands by wit; all with me’s meet that I can fashion fit” (1.2.179-180).

16 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Enlightenment, 9.
If Edmund undermines the kinship relations binding his own family together, his actions unwittingly lead to the reconstitution of the court around the central figure of the king. His deceptions force Edgar to disguise himself as Tom O’Bedlam, and in his beggar’s garb he meets the king and his ragged entourage on the heath. Expelled from the house of Gloucester, now under complete control of Cornwall and the conniving sisters, madness quickly encroaches on a group forced onto the margins of a kingdom gripped by the forces of enlightenment. But this madness has a positive effect, for upon reaching a hovel, Lear’s egotism begins to dissolve, and the possibility of a reestablishment of kinship relations within the royal court unfolds. Dennis Brown discusses this potential in his examination of Lear in terms of sociological group theory. When Kent tells the king “good my lord, enter here,” Lear responds “prithee go in thyself; seek thine own ease,” and soon after tells the Fool “in, boy; go first,” thereby “indicat[ing], if not an onset of ‘selflessness,’ at least a re-awakened sense of group mutuality.”

This possibility is first realized in the mock trial scene in 3.6, in which the group, under cover of madness and disguise, acts out the dispensation of sovereign justice on the heads of Lear’s manipulative daughters. Here, “the ‘good’ group re-form themselves around the lost leader, awaiting not only reconstitution but for some kind of redemption.” So while, as Brown points out, Lear initially prompts the dissolution of the court through his own egotist calculations, the madness that eventually descends upon him makes possible the rejuvenation of the court against the extreme egotism of the play’s antagonists. Transposed into the critique of enlightenment, the enlightened ego, as thoroughly isolated as it is imperious, is dissolved by a

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“mad” discourse that counteracts the excessive rationality gripping the kingdom and allows the resurgence of the kinship relations embodied in “group mutuality.”

Thus withdrawn, at least for the moment, from the rationalistic forces running rampant in the kingdom, madness goes to work disrupting the calculative rationality of the king and adjusting it back towards its initial intuitive state, a state finally reached at the end of Act IV, and signaled by his acknowledgement of Cordelia as his daughter: “Do not laugh at me; for, as I am a man, I think this lady to be my daughter Cordelia” (4.7.69-71). And with the king’s restoration of his kinships ties, the possibility of restoring the kingdom emerges, as well. His sovereignty ultimately is restored for a brief moment before his death, but ultimately the kingdom falls to Albany, who, along with Kent and Edgar, has remained steadfast against the destructive forces of enlightenment. As Jay Halio points out in his analysis of reason and madness in Lear, the rationality of Goneril, Regan and Edmund is merely apparent and soon belies itself. On the other hand, Albany personifies a more legitimate force: “reason mingled with compassion—the best kind of mixture, as events have shown—speaks through him,” particularly at the end of the play.20 Expressing not only the reason necessary for the effective exercise of power but, more significantly, the sympathies necessary for the maintenance of stable kinship relations against the ideological imbalances fostered by excessive calculation, he is able with help to halt the enlightened self-destruction of the kingdom. Through him the restoration of courtly relations is completed just prior to Lear’s death. Albany proclaims “For us, we will resign, during the life of this old majesty, to him our absolute power,” and to Kent and Edgar he restores “your rights; with boot, and much addition as your honors have more

than merited” (5.3.298-302). After Lear’s death, recognizing, as “friends of my soul,” his proper relation to the heroes Edgar and Kent, he confers his rightful power over the kingdom to them: “you twain rule this realm, and this gored state sustain” (5.3.319-320). With the end of the play, power is reinstated to those who understand the potential evils accompanying the exercise of enlightened self-interest.

Now it is possible to treat thoroughly the quote with which this essay opened. Lear, imploring Regan to help reverse Goneril’s judgment regarding his retinue of knights, appeals to her sense of filial duty, saying:

Thou better know’st
The offices of nature, bond of childhood,
Effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude;
Thy half o’ the kingdom hast thou not forgot,
Wherein I thee endowed. (2.4.175-179)

It is apparent from the sequence of terms deployed by the king that he is beginning to notice the impotence of terms of kinship to affect the judgment of his daughter. Prior to this scene, the king still believes that the kinship ties he did not explicitly sever as a result of the competition are still intact. In his initial skirmish with Goneril, he repeats “yet I have left a daughter” (1.4.249, 301). But when he comes to speak to his “remaining” daughter, he is forced by the very inadequacy of his speech to abandon any appeal based on familial relations. First invoking “the offices of nature” and the “bond of childhood,” he immediately resorts to the more impersonal terms of “courtesy” and “gratitude.” In the second half of his appeal, he withdraws all such terms of intimacy, and couches the matter in the purely calculative terms of exchange: “the half o’ the kingdom thou hast not forgot, wherein I thee endowed.” It sounds at this point as if he
were calling in a debt, and, at least subconsciously, he begins to recognize that the kinship ties upon which he based his decision to divide the kingdom have been torn apart (the process of conscious recognition begins two lines later, when he notices Kent, disguised as Caius, in the stocks). Thus in this line, we see the two ends of the rack on which his tortured soul is stretched: the kinship relations through which his sovereignty would be preserved after the division of the kingdom, and the calculated exchange initiated in the competition. In it we see, as if under a microscope, the tragic futility of his calculated attempt to secure his kingdom and his power against uncertainty. By dividing the kingdom, he pulls the ground out from under himself, and is himself rent apart in the division. Amidst his fragmented kingdom, he is the “nothing…i’ the middle.” King Lear is the sublime exhibition of this conflict, a portrait of enlightened humanity’s ironic self-destruction writ large in the figures of Shakespearean tragedy.