Is the grotesque quality of *King Lear* essential to its tragic quality, or is it at odds with that?

Within the opening twenty-five lines of William Shakespeare’s *King Lear* (first performed in 1606), the play makes a bad joke against social convention. When the Earl of Gloucester states “there was good sport at his making” (I.1.21-2) he refers to his bastard son Edmund, begot ‘saucily’ in an act that defies decorum in the universe of *King Lear*, in a manner that simultaneously defies the decorum of tragedy.¹ With Gloucester’s joke, the audience is immediately introduced to a flexible existence, where jokes relieve social tensions while accepted conventions are healthily maintained, as, for example, Edmund quite properly offers his services to the Duke of Kent. This is a world of temperance, order and friendship which seems to allow for peace and justice. Although Edmund clearly seethes at being called a bastard, his rage has no outlet as yet.

However, directly following this moment of casual frivolity, the audience is presented with another existence, one that is formal to the extreme. In a ritual order, following “one bearing a coronet”, the King enters with his train. He declares all his intentions to the court: his plan to divide his kingdom between his three daughters, to “shake all cares and business from our age” (I.1.37) and “Unburthened crawl toward death” (I.1.39). The division of the kingdom is enacted through a ritual honour game, not so much to decide the demarcations of the three new realms, which have already been agreed, but to satisfy Lear’s ego. Whereas Goneril and Regan follow this ritual, Cordelia cannot lie, due to her idealised, extreme adherence to the truth, and she gives a brutally honest response to her father. The following battle of words between Lear and Cordelia reveals the polarising extremism of the *King Lear* universe as one of complete negation. Within four lines “nothing” is repeated five times (I.1.85-8). Notably, Lear’s curse on Cordelia evokes the two extremes of existence: “the orbs | From whom we do exist and cease to be” (I.1.110). From this very first scene, it is clear that the universe of *King Lear*, the one which orbits the monarch, varies between totalities and utter negation. It is an extremist existence of ‘all or nothing’ and, ultimately, it is without the stabilising power of unbiased, moderating justice.

Arguably, this grotesque extremism, grotesque because it goes far beyond the bounds of reasonable experience, raises *King Lear* to the sublime. It shows the intensity of human effort, making human life appear significant because of the struggle.² Similarly, tragedy reminds us of what we value by depicting its destruction.³ This bloodthirsty view concludes that Lear, Cordelia, Gloucester, Edmund, Regan, Goneril, a servant and countless others in the final battle must all die for the audience to appreciate certain values. Naturally, this seems outrageously unbalanced, especially after the ruination of Lear and the unnecessarily cruel death of Cordelia. Rather than the significance of pain, *King Lear* seems to show the futility of existence. Since the publication of Jan Kott’s *Shakespeare our Contemporary* (1964), certain critics have asserted that this play should be interpreted in Absurdist terms. The extremism of *King Lear* and the pitiful laughter it can evoke demonstrates the futility of life’s struggles. While this is true to an extent, it does not account for the rebellious elements within the extremist framework of Lear’s court, emerging in the subplot of Edgar and Edmund which resists the grotesque futility of the play’s injustice. The question arises, then, what is

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³ Ibid.
the relation between justice, the grotesque and the absurd in *King Lear*, and are these concepts compatible with the play’s tragedy?

Firstly, *King Lear* can be interpreted in terms of Christian criticism and the similarities between the play and *The Book of Job* (henceforth *Job*) invites this interpretation. Aside from plot and thematic similarities, Lear, Gloucester and Job are all divested of their power, wealth, clothes and health, and they each question their fundamental values until even these are cast off.\(^4\) Job, for example, curses God as

He who crushes me for one hair,  
Who, for no reason, wounds and wounds again (9:17)

Similarly, Lear “grieves for the familial and ethical bonds he thought held the world together.”\(^5\) Finally, Gloucester, whose narrative shadows that of Lear, makes a lament as powerful as Job when he cries:

As flies to wanton boys are we to th’gods;  
They kill us for their sport (IV.1.37-8)

Lear, Gloucester and Job are all left desolate once their value systems are crushed, leading to thoughts of suicide in all three of them. Job quickly laments his birth, as does Lear in saying to Edgar disguised as ‘Poor Tom’, “Thou wert better in the grave” (III.4.95). Similarly, Gloucester attempts to renounce this world, which leads to Edgar’s attempt to teach his father patience through a false miracle. Soon Gloucester declares, “Henceforth | I’ll bear affliction” (IV.6.77-8), demonstrating that he has discovered patience through suffering.\(^6\) Arguably he forgets this, for he soon wishes to be mad, so as to forget his woes, complaining “No further, sir; a man may rot even here” (V.3.8). However, he does not fall into the same despondency as on the imagined cliffs, and thus, in observing the value of patience, does not yearn so desperately for death. In short, he achieves some moderation. Lear makes a similar struggle towards sanity and moderation, as does Job who regains his faith and wealth.

For Lear, however, this comparison fails in the final scene of the play, where the King is once again stripped of all that he holds dear. This would suggest that whatever Lear struggled to achieve comes to nothing in his death, which now means nothing. He is simply a pathetic old man tortured by life. A.C. Bradley defends this position, however, by arguing that the play should be called *The Redemption of King Lear* because Providence requires a wider range of experience “to be established in its whole extent”.\(^7\) As Michel de Montaigne writes in his essay ‘That we should not be deemed happy until after our death’:

Fortune sometimes seems precisely to lie in ambush for the last day of a man’s life to display her power to topple in a moment what she had built up over the length of years.\(^8\)

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\(^6\) *Ibid*, 72.  
This interpretation, then, would place the emphasis on the manner of Lear’s death, whether he dies with joy or pain in his final expression. In Job, it is stated that “Yahweh blessed Job’s latter condition even more than his former one” (42:12). This, in conjunction with Gloucester allegedly dying as his heart “Burst smilingly” (V.3.200), might suggest that Lear dies joyously, for the play to have some dramatic unity. Bradley certainly believes this, stating that an actor who does not portray this is “false to the text”. As such, Lear is purified by his grotesque suffering only after his death when he transcends into a more blessed condition.

According to this analysis, the grotesque heightens the play’s final justice, and Lear’s suffering is proportionate to his transcendence and heavenly reward. The audience witnesses the sublimity of human life made significant by the struggle. But this interpretation presumes the existence of the divine, which certainly not apparent based on the textual evidence of King Lear. While the gods are evoked, they do not visibly interfere with the action and the forces of nature are purely coincidental, raining on the just and unjust alike. Despite this, it remains possible for justice and the grotesque to be compatible if the play is interpreted in relation to Senecan tragedy, which is another significant influence on King Lear.

As with the comparison with Job, this contrast is justified by the formal similarities of Seneca’s tragedies and King Lear. For example, there is a host of characters with equal claims on the audience’s attention. This is a particularly Senecan trait, to treat the central concern from different perspectives for increased intensity and multiple perceptions. The central concern is Lear’s anger, the archetypal Senecan harmatia—ira or wrath—a mythic anger by which Lear defines himself in the opening scene: “Come not between the dragon and his wrath!” (I.1.120). This enables Lear to share some blame for his suffering, for he is not subjected to irrational punishment but his fate results from his wrath and his inability to subdue or release it. Additionally, it is not the grotesque weight of his punishment that drives Lear mad, it is because he cannot expiate this grotesque anger. He cannot even express it, as he states:

I will have such revenges on you both
…
What they are, yet I know not (II.4.275-7)

As a human unable to conceive the full extent of his wrath, Lear is consumed by this superhuman passion. By dismissing Cordelia, the most eligible sacrifice for this violent wrath, Lear can only lament this loss in the line “I did her wrong” (I.5.20). By divesting himself of his authority, Lear is unable to force any other character into the role of the sacrificial victim to his wrath, and so he “rages titanically and aimlessly at his daughters and the world”. In turn, this leads to his baffled outrage, desperate introspection and inspired anguish.

In accordance with the multiple perspectives there are different conceptions of this mythic wrath. Firstly, Cornwall is equally possessed by this rage “which men | May blame but not control” and, like Lear, he tries to export his responsibility for this fury (III.7.25-7). Cornwall

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9 Bradley, 94.
10 Ibid, 82.
12 Ibid, 152.
is able to exorcise this, however, because he has the power and authority to do so. Secondly, Cordelia offers the extreme opposite to this perspective by embodying patience: “she was a queen | Over her passion” (IV.3.12-3). Finally, between these extreme perspectives, Edgar represents a balance in Aristotelian terms, a third way to the polarised extremism of the King Lear universe. He is angry at the right things with the right people in the proper manner, at the proper time, and for the proper duration.¹⁴ He demonstrates the validity of Francis Bacon’s principle that “Whosoever is out of patience is out possession of his soul.”¹⁵ Edgar continually bears free and patient thoughts, remaining loyal to his credo that “Ripeness is all” (V.2.11), providing a realistic example of moderation between the cacophony of extremes in King Lear.

This moderation allows Edgar to embody the Senecan choric role, with the Fool, to “curb the surging emotion and counsel prudent self-preservation.”¹⁶ However, the Fool’s expression of this, with ‘Poor Tom,’ is “unthinkable in the brittle world of Senecan tragedy”, for together they insist on a flexible, pragmatic and patient existence.¹⁷ To the Fool, the ‘all or nothing’ world of King Lear is a bad joke, and so he attempts to relieve Lear’s wrath through laughter. However, the old man’s inability to ‘break’ into tears or laughter means that he can only rage madly, temporarily averting his wrath but not exorcising it. Thus, this interpretation suggests that Lear’s anger returns in the final scene, that the demands of justice are not met, and that Lear’s final words demonstrate a resurgence of his madness.

However, tragedy is still possible in the Senecan interpretation of King Lear because, in this form of tragedy, the greater emphasis is placed on the sense that something went wrong which might have been avoided.¹⁸ In other words, that there is a tragic human failure that spins grotesquely out of control.¹⁹ This is in order to remind the audience of what they cherish – health, patience and moderation – not only by seeing it destroyed, but seeing it rebuilt and destroyed again. The additional destruction in King Lear, however, simply appears wantonly cruel, violently attacking the audience’s expectations and eliminating their hope. From this arise the arguments for an Absurdist interpretation of King Lear.

Undoubtedly there is something offensive and disconcerting about works which abandon all hope and justice. However, Absurdist theatre does not attempt to console the audience, rather it serves to reveal the grotesqueness of reality. This can arouse compassion but not pity or terror, the two essentials laid out in Aristotle’s Poetics, and therefore it must first be questioned whether the Absurd can be classed as tragedy.²⁰ The tragic catastrophe, Eagleton argues, is plausible in that it springs from a believable situation, not because it is proportionate to the situation. The tragic hero must win our compassion, despite their flaws, while not wholly deserving their punishment in order to inspire catharsis.²¹ This is the grotesque disproportion of the tragic situation. It becomes Absurd, however, when every

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¹⁶ Miola, 160.
¹⁷ Ibid, 164.
¹⁸ Ibid, 161.
¹⁹ Eagleton, 107.
²¹ Eagleton, 139-40.
decision the hero can take, when every move they can make will destroy them – the situation is grotesque because there is simply no escape.\textsuperscript{22}

In this interpretation, to reveal the person behind the hero’s mask, they cannot be simply stripped naked but must be morally and physically massacred: the hero must become a “ruin’d piece of nature”.\textsuperscript{23} No social system, no belief, no point of reference is left intact; everything is desecrated and destroyed, leaving behind only the bare earth, an empty stage.\textsuperscript{24} Both the process and the result of this annihilation inherently entail Absurdist suffering.\textsuperscript{25} In Suzuki Tadashi’s interpretation, \textit{The Tale of Lear} (1984), the humour of this is emphasised by a Nurse character who reads the play onstage while the action unfolds, abruptly interrupting the action at certain points with “a raucous cackle”.\textsuperscript{26} This laughter, a contradiction of tragedy’s traditional decorum, simultaneously allows for dark comedy and frightening tragedy, but it is not wholly one or the other.

As all orders of value disintegrate in the Absurd universe of \textit{King Lear}, the hideous and pitiful realities of existence are exposed. Gloucester’s attempted suicide, for example, is only significant if the gods exist. If not, then the gesture does not solve, alter or mean anything.\textsuperscript{27} Therefore, both the deed and its result are grotesquely comedic, especially on Shakespeare’s bare stage where a man, imagining himself to be on the clifftops and throwing himself to the floor is an inherently comedic device. Viewing this action as dark humour, it is difficult not to laugh. Following this the stage direction, “Enter Lear, mad” reinforces the Absurd comedy, for while Lear’s speeches are occasionally heart-warming, occasionally spiteful, they are anything but terrifying.

In his final lines of this scene, Lear also refers to himself as “The natural fool of fortune” (IV.6.185), highlighting the position of the Fool and the forces of chance at work in this play. Firstly, it is important that Lear now perceives himself as a most helpless victim. Previously, in Act Three he claimed “I am a man | More sinned against than sinning” (III.3.59-60), implying that he undertook definite actions and can recognise his tormentors. In this latter statement, however, Lear does not recognise any antagonist or himself as the hero, only fortune as the universal tormentor. In Absurdist theatre, both the tormentor and the victim are mocked, as the latter invents the former in recognising itself as the victim.\textsuperscript{28} But Absurdism also recognises that all human perspectives, including Fortune, are artificial – human constructs to express the futility of existence. Therefore, Lear mocks himself, by acknowledging that he is a victim to nothing other than the Absurd reality and worldview that he created.

In the lament of Act Three, Lear also labels himself as a ‘man’, but by Act Four, he calls himself ‘the fool’. He has been so completely destroyed he is no longer recognisable as a king or a man: he is a fool. This is significant as, for Kott, when there is no system left to appeal to, the Clown becomes the central figure of theatre.\textsuperscript{29} The Clown is wise in realising

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Kott, 108.
\item \textsuperscript{23} \textit{Ibid}, 125.
\item \textsuperscript{24} \textit{Ibid}, 118.
\item \textsuperscript{25} \textit{Ibid}, 106.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Kott, 120.
\item \textsuperscript{28} \textit{Ibid}, 105.
\item \textsuperscript{29} \textit{Ibid}, 113.
\end{itemize}
that the world and its systems are folly. He refuses to be classified by systems. He breaks down social distinctions and deprives majesty of its sacredness. This is certainly true for the Fool in King Lear who introduces comedy into tragedy and laughs at characters from every social class. Indeed, the Fool shows that “true madness is to recognize this world as rational”, and so he exposes the absurdity of reality and all the constructs of philosophies that people throw up to try and understand or establish order on existence.\(^{30}\) He is among the first to explain the foolishness of Lear’s willing division of the kingdom, calling him a fool and saying, “All thy other titles thou hast given away; that thou wast born with” (I.4.133). Thus, Absurdist theatre endeavours to reveal that,

…we cry that we are come
To this great stage of fools (IV.6.176-7)

Both the Fool and the play itself reveal this reality to the audience by deconstructing the artificial social constructs which attempt to obscure it, those philosophies which attempt to show that life has meaning and is not, ultimately, futile.

However, if the gods do not exist, if social orders are foolish, can justice exist? In the Absurdist interpretation of King Lear, there is only grotesque violence which cannot be unjust as objective values of justice are imaginary. The play’s violence reveals the social myths surrounding this perspective and, while this process allows for tragic suffering, justice is completely irrelevant to the equation. However, as Eagleton observes, there is something disconcerting about this and there remains an impulse for the audience to say, as Edgar does even after he reduces himself to ‘Poor Tom’, “That’s something yet” (II.2.21).\(^{31}\) This is where the Absurdist interpretation arguably falls short, after all, the Clown is not the central figure in the concluding scene. Quite the opposite, in fact, as the Fool does not appear after Act Three, Lear is dead, and Edgar is raised up from the condition of Poor Tom and ennobled through his suffering.

Secondly, Kott’s Clown is a problematic figure as it is purely destructive, doing away with the existing social order without suggesting any other. Kott’s argument also implies that the universe of King Lear supposes itself to be based on reasonableness but, as has been shown, this is not the case. The primary framework of Lear’s court is extremist and incredibly fragile and members of the court clearly recognise this, as Kent argues: “To plainness honour’s bound | When majesty falls to folly” (I.1.146-7). From the outset, the universe of King Lear is explicitly shown to be completely based on unreason. Therefore, the Fool is not a character exposing the unreasonableness of a supposedly rational world. He is, instead, a choric “voice of common sense for the audience in a world where everything goes awry.”\(^{32}\) Drawing from the absurdist construction, the Fool exposes the comedy of Lear’s actions but, rather than just laughing, he attempts to draw laughter from Lear, understanding that “if the Lear’s of the world could laugh at themselves – there would be no such tragedy.”\(^{33}\) Laughter is a healthy form of release often indistinguishable from tears, one that enables the sufferer to step outside of themselves and view their situation dispassionately and with objectivity.

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\(^{30}\) Ibid, 136.

\(^{31}\) Eagleton, 24.

\(^{32}\) R.A. Foakes, Hamlet versus Lear (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 188.

The Absurdist interpretation also forgets the element of responsibility in *King Lear*, for it is Lear’s self-determined action that sets the forces of his undoing in motion. Finally, many Absurdist interpretations, including Suzuki’s 1984 production and Peter Brooks’ 1962 film, the scenes which suggest hope are often removed, particularly the Servant’s attack on Cornwall in Act Three, Scene 7. While this is justified, in that the First Folio of 1623 also cut this scene, this was possibly for sociological reasons rather than to impose a bias of futility. However, several suggestions of the Absurdist interpretation can contribute towards a more hopeful understanding of *King Lear*, which reconciles the grotesque elements in a form of Absurd justice.

Admittedly, the old forces of justice are as absent as Cordelia, as crippled as Gloucester, and as powerless as Lear, yet an abstract concept of justice endures. Firstly, after Lear divests himself of his authority, Regan and Goneril dispense their own justice in the ensuing power vacuum. This is particularly strengthened in the Folio alterations in which the sisters appear “more reasonable and less disdainful”. These scenes are necessary, as it is easy to pity Lear and forget the reasonableness of his daughters’ request that he reduce his band of a hundred potentially volatile knights. Additionally, Lear “condemns their behaviour, which politically makes sense, as wicked, invoking a moral valuation he has not applied to his own actions.”

Only when Lear challenges their authority do the sisters react with unjust violence, undermining their right to rule.

Abstract justice also exists in the lower classes, as with the rebellion of the Servant against Cornwall. Margot Heinemann argues that this scene was originally cut by Shakespeare because the suggestion of a justified popular uprising was “perhaps felt to be going too far”, in the context of the Jacobean court, not that Shakespeare wanted to emphasise the hopelessness of this world. This is emphasised as Edgar, disguised as a peasant, is seen to beat Oswald, a gentleman, to death. The imagery of a plain but righteous man winning against the odds could have been a powerful and dangerous symbol for Shakespeare’s audience, and so it had to be removed.

Most significantly, however, the power struggle of the next generation increasingly supersedes Lear’s action, and the audience witnesses Edgar’s rise to power. Although he is the last major character to appear onstage for the first time, and then only fleetingly, he comes to dominate the play. Edgar exercises the most righteous anger whilst avoiding emotional commitment and remaining clear-minded. As a symbol, he becomes more definite through the play, gaining mental strength by beguiling Gloucester and physical prowess by defeating Oswald. Furthermore, as the battle between the French and English armies takes place offstage, the dramatic emphasis is instead given to the duel between Edgar and Edmund. As he advances, Edgar ushers in an impartial judicial system, in a process that has surprising ramifications on the audience itself and the notions of tragedy and justice in *King Lear*. This can be best understood in reference to René Girard’s philosophy of sacrifice.

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34 Takashi, 115.
35 Foakes, 187.
36 Ibid, 216.
38 Ibid, 235
39 Foakes, 199.
40 Ibid, 204.
According to Girard, every society must repress the natural, unappeased rage of its citizenry. It does through the use of a scapegoat or surrogate victim to absorb the violence which would otherwise be vented on its own members: “The sacrifice serves to protect the community from its own violence”.\(^{41}\) This preventative measure works to freeze the community’s aggressive impulses by sacrificing an actual or figurative victim. The sacrifice must be just, in that it is balanced, and immersed in ritual, such as the heavy symbolic human or animal sacrifices of early civilisations, so as to reduce the risk of reprisals or cyclical revenge.\(^{42}\) While this system may be successful in small communities, it is too volatile and could potentially break into self-destructive cycles of internal revenge, rather than allaying the repressed passions of the society. As Girard states:

As long as there exists no sovereign and independent body capable of taking the place of the injured party and taking upon itself the responsibility for revenge, the danger of interminable escalation remains.\(^{43}\)

This is why the state created by Regan and Goneril breaks down so quickly. They are unable to remain detached from the offences committed against them but seek a personal revenge and reprisal which is swiftly followed by escalating destruction that also consumes them in the end. This is why, in large and heavily-policing states, ritualised sacrifices are replaced with an impartial judiciary to deal and mete justice. Under this system, justice is not achieved through sacred violence, it is impartial.

Secondly, Girard recounts the history of the justice system, from its origins in preventative ritual sacrifice, through compensatory methods such as trial by combat, and finally to the establishment of a judicial system.\(^{44}\) *King Lear* symbolically performs every stage of this history. The first form of justice is Lear’s ritualised court where sacrifices, such as Regan and Goneril sacrificing the truth, are made to assuage Lear’s violence. Cordelia cannot do this, Lear is not appeased, and he vents his wrath more furiously on his new sacrificial victim, Cordelia. After disassembling his ritual authority, however, Lear finds no other victim except for his own body and health on which to expiate his wrath. As they come to power, Regan and Goneril deal justice by following Lear’s pattern, reacting violently to personal offences. Finally, Edgar emerges as a suitable champion for objective justice, as is shown in the duel with Edmund, a form of trial by combat. It is poignant that Edgar enters this duel as Albany’s champion for two reasons. Firstly, Albany is the figure with the highest lawful authority left onstage whose character represents honourable ideals. Secondly, by fighting on Albany’s behalf for the accusation of Edmund’s adultery, Edgar is not committing an act of personal revenge for Gloucester’s torture. Instead, Edgar fights for Albany’s honour in a case which has nothing to do with his own. By doing this, he also prevents Albany from seeking personal satisfaction and diffuses the threat of escalating cyclical revenge. This duel represents the second evolutionary stage of justice: compensatory measures such as trial by combat. Through this, Edgar has ‘merited’ the honour to rule and receives the ‘wages’ of his virtue (V.3.301-4). He takes power, and with this power he forges a system of impartial, balanced ideals to replace the extremist order of Lear’s court.

However, there is also a remarkable relationship between *King Lear* as a performance and Girard’s notion of sacrifice, for the play certainly unleashes grotesque violence on the

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\(^{43}\) *Ibid*, 18.

\(^{44}\) *Ibid*, 22.
audience. Arguably where conventional tragedy shows what society values by destroying it, *King Lear* reminds the audience of what they value, justice, by bringing it into creation, while simultaneously demonstrating the undesirable violence that preceded it. For this to happen, for the spectators to learn this lesson, the audience itself necessitates the sacrifice of the characters on stage, the figurative victims. It is the onlookers, not the characters, who make the violence of tragedy necessary, and therefore the audience must also suffer, as Girard writes, “the actual murderer was punished in some manner, either beaten or sent into exile” to avoid the cycle of revenge. Shakespeare unveils his audience and their violent impulses which made this tragedy necessary, which makes the very notion of tragedy necessary, as barbarous. It is a bad joke, a bad joke at the audience’s expense that, while the prehistoric and fictional *King Lear* universe reaches the heights of civilisation through Edgar, society’s underlying bloodlust in the real world is revealed in all its savagery.

The question remains, however, whether the grotesque element of *King Lear* is essential to its tragedy. As Girard’s ideas show, the audience must suffer for exact justice to be completed, hence the grotesque violence of *King Lear*. As Eagleton observes, many tragedies end with justice: what is tragic is that so much bloodshed is necessary for it. But Eagleton is referring to justice within the play, not plays exacting justice through coordinated ritual violence directed at the audience, disturbing the viewers’ sensibilities and making them physically recoil. This begs the final question: is *King Lear* a tragedy?

Referring to the world within *King Lear*, G. Wilson-Knight calls it a ‘universe’ because it captures the scale of “life’s abundance magnificently compressed into one play”. Whilst interpreting *King Lear* in relation to *Job* or Senecan tragedy, Shakespeare’s play can be viewed as formally tragic and having some elements of justice which unite its grotesque and tragic qualities. It can also be approached by Absurdist theory and, while the overall effect is tragic in demonstrating life’s futility, it is tempered by comedy. While each interpretation is valid, the entirety of *King Lear* universe cannot be encompassed by a single theory. The play’s enormity resists classification as pure tragedy or comedy: it should be called tragicomic.

Yet *King Lear* certainly represents the twilight of the idols, the end of rigid absolutes, and the dawn of flexible realism, the world for which Lear’s Fool strove. Indeed, this could be why the Fool vanishes after Act Three, where Lear’s decline seems inevitable and Edgar’s rise increasingly assured. He is no longer required to temper the King’s extremism: Lear has lost his claim to kingship and Edgar almost literally rescues the crown from the gutter. Whether from joy or pain, Lear dies by his immense passion after the titanic calamity of his life. Kent, the epitome of uncompromising loyalty, leaves the stage to die for obedience: “My master calls me; I must not say no” (V.3.524). Although Edgar’s narrative follows a similar trajectory of injustice, decline and suffering, his decent is voluntary, a willing submission to circumstance to “preserve” himself (II.3.6). Similarly, Edgar does not approach the same despondency and state of nothingness as Lear or Gloucester, for he realises “worse I may be yet” (IV.1.28). He experiences injustice at every social level and is able to remain objective. Indeed, he bears the closest similarity to Edmund, ultimately making it necessary for the duel to occur, for Edgar to remove the strongest opposition to his objective justice: Edmund’s objective injustice.

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46 Eagleton, 138.
The epic scope of *King Lear* allows for a multitude of interpretations, from Biblical or Classical references, or from modern Absurdist theory. What this play most clearly demonstrates, however, is the danger of rigid, extremist structures and the benefits of a flexible, honest existence. Arguably, the play represents the death of absolute tragedy and the structure of inflexible rituals on which this depends. In one sense, it envisages the dawn of the tragicomic, the seemingly pathetic tragedies of ordinary people which emerges with Modernism. However, the play can be interpreted as a ritual sacrifice, where the actors onstage take the place of the symbolic victim and must suffer grotesque violence to assuage the spectator’s subconscious bloodlust. But the audience might find the grotesque violence of *King Lear* too much for it to be said to exact reasonable justice; the play seems to attack the audience. Whereas the universe of *King Lear* is shown to have advanced from an ancient, fragile court where justice depended on one man with a crown to a recognisably modern, impartial and fair judiciary system, the audience *still* lives in a world where it is necessary to learn the lessons of *King Lear*. After millennia of so-called civilisation, injustice abounds – and that is truly grotesque. As such, Shakespeare attacks his audience, from the Renaissance to the present day, for bringing about the conditions that warrant the continued portrayal of the end of the heroic age and the rise of justice. But just as this latter condition is good for it is balanced, so too is the play’s tragedy tempered with comedy. Thus, *King Lear* is not Shakespeare’s greatest tragedy. Arguably it is not a tragedy at all. It is, however, an incredible artwork and perhaps the greatest history of violence, justice and the tragic.
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