King Lear and the Poverty of Justice

(Preliminary Draft)

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At its most intense and visionary moments, Shakespeare’s *King Lear* denounces justice as a hollow instrument of power. When Lear at his maddest meets with the blinded Gloucester on Dover beach, he attains a special kind of lucidity that Shakespeare often connects with madness. Astonished at Lear’s acuity, the only witness to the scene, Gloucester’s eldest son Edgar, calls it “reason in madness.” (4.vi.171) Lear tells the blind Gloucester,

> A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears. See how yon justice rails on yon simple thief. Hark in thine ear: change places and handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief? (4.vi.146-151)

Lear thus calls into question the substance of justice, charging that it amounts to no more than thievery in formal gowns. He then links this charge with doubts about the legitimacy of political authority:

> Thou has seen a farmer’s dog bark at a beggar?... And the creature run from the cur – there thou mightst behold the great image of authority. A dog’s obeyed in office. (4.vi.150-5)

Lear’s madness produces a kind of Machiavellian wisdom. It is not justice that sustains political order, but convention and the threat of violence. The ideal of justice is mere window-dressing, Lear suggests. It is helpless to restrain human weakness linked to
power: “Plate sin with gold,/And the strong lance of justice hurtles breaks.” (4.vi.161-2)

And so he abandons justice altogether: “None does offend, none, I say none. I’ll able ‘em.” With this resolution, Lear crystallizes one of the most subversive ideas running through the play – that justice is no basis for political authority.

This idea commands attention because flies in the face in the face both of the great authorities on politics of Shakespeare’s own culture and the leading authorities of our own. Plato of course founded his Republic on the ideal of justice; Aristotle ordered his better and worse regimes in terms of the justice of their constitutions; Thomas Aquinas’ insisted that first and foremost “the King is the guardian of justice.” (Question 50)

The leading political thinker of our own time, John Rawls, similarly held that justice is the basis and purpose of legitimate political authority (at least in a liberal democracy) and most contemporary liberal thinkers have followed his lead. In particular, he famously declared that “justice is the first virtue of social institutions,” and “the right” (that is, what justice requires) should always be prior to “the good” (what individuals or communities may think best). For Rawls, political justice meant equal basic liberties, fair access to public offices, and the difference principle (that socio-economic inequalities be organized to the benefit of the least well-off). He argued not only that these principles should always take priority on political matters, but also that citizens participating in political deliberation should justify their positions only with reference to principles of justice (because unlike principles of justice concepts of the good life are essentially contested).

Two of the essential Rawlsian political ideas can then be summarized as follows:
1. The first purpose of legitimate politics is the attainment of justice;
2. Citizens must distinguish their personal identities (informed by a view of the good life), from their political persona as citizens (guided only by justice).

These ideas are widely espoused by contemporary political liberals.

*King Lear* is of particular interest today because it challenges these ideas. In particular, it challenges the centrality of justice to political order. Moreover, it does so with a certain authority of its own. In the views of many critics and audiences, it is the supreme work of Western drama to date. At any rate, the recent parade of productions on Broadway and elsewhere suggest that it has lost little of its vitality over 400 years after its composition.

In this paper I will argue that one of the things the play is designed to show is that the ideal of justice cannot sustain a healthy political order. In this way, Shakespeare not only defies the authorities of his own time, but speaks very directly to our own. In particular, I will argue that he suggests a position that shares much in common with contemporary communitarian critiques of liberalism like Charles Taylor and Michael Sandel in two key respects: (1) he presents justice as a remedial virtue (that is, one which primarily compensates for the limitations of other virtues); and (2) that an overemphasis on justice as the primary political good threatens to undermine the essential preconditions of a vital political life (Taylor’s social thesis).

I will advance this position by developing four interpretive points about the play:
1. The play is structured to cause the audience to question their commitment to justice.

2. It shows that justice needs to be modulated by reference to some other value(s).

3. Each of the plot lines reveals that the essential political value (for fellow citizens) is care and the essential personal value is love (of family). These values are connected.

4. Lear’s story illustrates the indivisibility of the personal and political.

I will tie these points together by suggesting that the play illustrates (a.) that care is at least as essential to the life of a political community as justice; (b.) that care contributes to the balanced application of justice; and (c.) justice alone tends to undermine care, one of the crucial preconditions of political community. These claims contravene Rawlsian political theory and support the communitarian critique of it.

I.

The play is deliberately structured to call the priority of justice – a belief shared by many in both its original and current audiences - into question. Like most of Shakespeare’s plays, it features a main plot and a subplot. The main plot follows the doings of Lear and his daughters. The subplot follows Gloucester and his two sons. Both plots involve children doing grave harms to fathers (mothers are notably absent). But in both cases, we are told, and we see, the fathers first doing serious harms to their children. The action of the play is then children taking vengeance on their fathers for wrongs done to them in the past. Both fathers get their comeuppance. The movement of the play is then a fulfillment of a very harsh (retributive) form of justice.
However, Shakespeare assures that the audience’s sympathy with the children will be limited by making the injustices committed against the children mainly (although not exclusively) offstage - events preliminary to the action of the play. On the other hand, by putting the worst excesses of the children’s revenge at center stage, and after the parents have had time to realize and repent their injustices, Shakespeare assures that the audience will be alienated by the children’s vengeance. Their empathy will be with the objects of justice rather than with the instruments of its accomplishment. In short, the play is structured to produce an emotional revolt against justice.

In the mainplot, the audience is immediately confronted with Lear’s explicit public favoritism for his youngest daughter Cordelia. For example, in the midst of what Northrop Frye aptly describes as his “dreary love contest,” Lear himself announces to the assemblage, including his older daughters, “I loved her most, and thought to set my rest/On her kind nursery.” (1.i.23-4) Shakespeare leaves no doubt that the older daughters have long known that they are eclipsed in his affection. Following the contest, Lear’s eldest daughter (Goneril) remarks to the middle daughter (Regan), “He always loved our sister best.” (1.i.292) Indeed, as the play begins, Lear is planning not only to marry Cordelia to far more eminent suitor (France or Burgundy) than he has given his older daughters (Albany and Cornwall), but also to give her a third of Kingdom “more opulent than your sisters.” (1.i.86) Indeed, the whole ill-conceived notion of dividing his Kingdom in three and giving a piece to each of his daughters rather than simply passing it to his eldest daughter and her husband, appears to be means of favoring Cordelia (and
assuring his own comfortable retirement through her). The whole division of the
kingdom then is deeply unfair as well as unwise – as indeed is his whole scheme of
devoiding the responsibilities of King while retaining the power and honor at his
daughters’ expense.

A further point that deserves emphasis is the humiliating means that he chooses to
disburse his Kingdom. He compels each of his daughters to compete in professing their
love for him in exchange for their portions of the Kingdom – although he has clearly
already ear-marked the best portion for Cordelia. So in a beautiful demonstration of the
partiality of his own love, he plans in advance to publicly slight his older daughters
public declarations of love in favor of Cordelia so as to award an unequal share of the
kingdom. The results of the love contest further illuminate his poverty as a parent. When
Cordelia is unable to “heave/ [her] heart into [her] mouth,” he not only withdraws the
portion of the Kingdom he had intended to give her as a dowry, but disowns her and
encourages her two suitors (Burgundy and France) to abandon her. (1.i.91-2) But the
very violence of his reaction again illustrates the partiality of his love – it is Cordelia’s
love that he expects and needs, and its denial that he cannot tolerate.

So, at the beginning of the play, Lear is and has been a terrible father, selfish and
neglectful or his older daughters, and in the opening scene he ends of being terribly cruel
to his youngest and favorite. It is no surprise to find his older daughters nurse deep
resentment, and even a deadly hatred, against him.
Gloucester’s parental performance is thrown into an equally uncomplimentary light in the opening scene. When Kent asks “Is this not your son, my lord?” Gloucester declines to acknowledge him: “His breeding, sir, hath been at my charge.” (1.i.7-8) Gloucester then ashamedly acknowledges that Edmund is in fact his “whoreson”, and then adds “But I have a son, sir,” meaning his older, legitimate son Edgar – all of this in front of Edmund. He concludes the introduction by remarking “He hath been out nine years, and away he shall again.” (1.i.31-2) There is no doubt then that Gloucester has been cruelly neglectful of Edmund in favor of Edgar, and it is not especially surprising when we soon discover that Edmund has little love for his father or half-brother and intends to steal what he can from them.

As with Lear, however, Gloucester’s poorness as a parent is illustrated in the first act of the play not so much through his longstanding neglect of Edmund, but how easily he is turned against his favorite son. Finding Edmund with a letter purportedly from Edgar that argues for his forcible retirement, Gloucester orders Edgar’s peremptory arrest, and soon that he be killed on sight.

In both the cases of Lear and Gloucester, we immediately hear (and see some evidence of) a long pattern of neglect against certain of the children (who now resent them). We also see them both turn cruelly against their favorites. Indeed, in the actual action of Act I the neglected children benefit from the fathers turning on their former favorites. So we hear about a pattern of neglect in their regard, but we see only brief manifestations of it.
The cruelty and unfairness winds up directed against their former favorites, and it is with them that the audience is likely to primarily sympathize.

In Acts II and III what we actually see is the formerly neglected children neglect their parents in turn. Goneril and Regan refuse to sustain the 100 knights that Lear has reserved for himself. Rather, they permit him to abjure their roofs and contend with the storm. Edmund deceives his father regarding Edgar’s intentions and then neglects to keep his father’s confidence in regard to treacherous correspondence concerning the French invasion. All of this can be seen as a movement of justice – the harms are turned onto the heads of the perpetrators in kind. Children who have known little love, return little. The negligent fathers get what they deserve from their children. Shakespeare, however, by keeping the neglect of the children offstage, and focusing in detail on the neglect of the parents, deliberately undermines the audience’s commitment to seeing justice done.

Moreover, Shakespeare also undermines the audience’s sympathy with the movement of justice in other ways as well. In both cases, the justice has come to the fathers slowly and in their slightly befuddled age. Both Lear and Gloucester remain sympathetic in part because they are failing and in part because they do manage to show care and loyalty to some (Lear to his fool, for example, and Gloucester to Lear). And they are far removed from the worst harms they have committed (indeed, they are more nearly implicated in their crimes against their favored children). Moreover, in Lear’s case, the realization that his daughters do not care for him comes slow and hard (in Act II), and we watch him
come to understand and repent of much of his own behavior (although not strictly in connection with Regan and Goneril) even as he drawn inexorably towards madness. Lear provides a powerful illustration of the problem with justice delayed – the person experiencing the punishment is at least in some important sense not the same as the one who committed the crime and deserved the punishment. Gloucester’s story, on the other hand, graphically illustrates the problem with focusing on the proportionality of punishment alone. In his case, the harm he experiences at Edmund’s hands (i.e., deception and betrayal) is arguably no more than he should expect. But the consequence of Edmund’s betrayal is that he is left to the tender mercies of Regan and Cornwall, who proceed to pluck out his eyes. In Act V, Scene III, Edgar reflects that there is justice in this punishment:

The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
Make instruments to plague us.
The dark and vicious place where thee he got
Cost him his eyes. (5.iii.168-71)

Perhaps so. And perhaps this remark would seem less hard hearted if Gloucester lost his sight naturally and gradually with his advancing age. But there is something terrible and repellent in the cruelty with which his eyes are in fact plucked out. Cornwall’s motivation in the blinding scene, his maliciousness, is far more horrible than Gloucester’s neglectful cruelty to his son. That helps to explain why it one of the notorious scenes of villainy in English theater. So even if Edgar is right and the scales are being balanced, the scene also suggests that the instrument and motivation by which justice is being done is crucially important. Justice can be delivered by a villain through the means of consummate cruelty, but this may be a balancing of scales we would prefer to abjure.
Finally, the horrible visions of Gloucester’s blinding and Lear being turned out into the storm is contrasted unfavorably with the forgiveness that Cordelia shows after being disowned and banished and which Edgar shows after his father orders his killing on sight. Cordelia persuades her husband, the King of France, to invade England to save her father from the cruelty of her sisters. When she finds him, her ministrations bring him back from madness in a famously affecting scene. (4.vii) Edgar cares for his blinded father, guides him to Dover, and saves him from his own despair. (4.vi.32-3, 75-9) Having watched the harsh punishment doled out to the neglectful parents, the audience cannot help but appreciate these acts of mercy and love in sharp contrast with the harsh justice pursued by the other (neglected) children.

So the play is structured to suggest that a kind of movement of natural justice in the development of its two main plots. But the action is organized so as to turn the audience against the movement of justice, and to draw their sympathy towards the action of forgiveness, mercy and love. Justice is shown to be a crude and slow instrument, often allied to cruelty, that must at best be guided and framed by some higher principle.

III.

The main Lear plot and the Gloucester subplot conspire to show that while a world entirely without justice is horrible, so too is a world where justice triumphs too fully. The two plots of the play present tragically extreme experiences of justice and so suggest the need for some balanced position in between these extremes – that we need some justice, but justice modulated by some other values. In particular, the main Lear plot invokes the
vision of a world without justice – a condition that Edgar teaches Gloucester must be avoided – although in the end a saving modicum of justice is restored. On the other hand, the harsh and unbending justice that Edgar invokes to explain the Gloucester sub-plot seems equally unattractive. So after alienating the audience’s sympathies from the movement of justice in general, the plots illuminates the need for judicious balance informed by other human virtues.

The Lear plot of course comes close to resolving itself relatively justly, with Lear chastised but restored and reunited with Cordelia – and indeed the play was performed with the “happy” ending for a century on the stage with Edgar and Cordelia’s marriage ending the play. If the French army were only successful against the English armies fielded by Albany and Edmund (on behalf of Regan), then Lear might be restored and Regan and Goneril and their followers punished in some fashion (although Albany might then lose the chance to demonstrate his loyalty to the King). Again, if only Edmund had confessed his plot to kill Lear and Cordelia in prison a little earlier, things might have ended happily. But as it happens, all goes inexplicably awry, and the innocent Cordelia is hanged, and Lear dies broken-hearted.

The world suggested by this resolution of the main Lear plot is at best a morally ambiguous one. As Stoppard’s Tragedian once described tragedy – “the bad end badly, the good unluckily.” The villains are destroyed, but so too are the heroes (or at least many of them), and the loyal Kent proposes to follow his Master into death. In the final lines of the play, Kent describes the world as a rack on which Lear has been stretched,
and which he must be happy to leave. (5.iii.313-4) This is the same kind of world that Gloucester describes in his despair following his blinding, a world without justice: “As flies to wanton boys are we to the Gods/They kill us for their sport.” (4.i.37-8)

Yet the play does not end with Lear’s death. The characters accept that, as Albany puts it, “our present business is to general woe,” but they also begin to reconstruct the state on a legitimate and just basis. Albany reassures the final assemblage that

All friends shall taste
The wages of their virtues and all foes
The Cup of their deservings. (5.iii.301-3)

He announces that leadership of the state will be conferred on Edgar and Kent, who have both performed nobly under terribly adverse conditions.

Here Albany demonstrates the wisdom that Edgar has lately taught to Gloucester, when he despaired and sought death. Edgar pretends to lead his father to the edge of Dover cliff and permits him to believe that he has leaped off. He assures the audience in an aside, “Why I do trifle thus with his despair/is done to cure it.” (4.vi.33-4) “Men,” Edgar tells him, “must endure.” (5.ii.10) He then persuades his father that the Gods intervened to save him, and so that there is a kind of intentionality and justice operating in the world. If men act bravely and rightly, then some justice may yet be preserved.

And of course that is exactly what the resolution of the play provides – some justice. Regan and Goneril destroy one another, Cornwall has been killed by his own servant, and Albany and Edgar are ultimately left in control of the state. Lear even kills the Captain of
the guard as he attempts to hang Cordelia. Admittedly, Cordelia dies as well, a kind of sacrificial victim to the restoration of justice. But justice remains a great human value, and one that we must struggle to attain, so much so that at times it may be correct to deceive ourselves to keep hope alive. Still, the Lear plot shows a world in which justice is scant, despite our best of efforts. The hopes for justice are thin, even if they cannot be abandoned entirely.

The subplot offers a much more complete fulfillment of justice. Edgar, who has been betrayed by his half-brother Edmund, returns to avenge himself in a fair duel before the remaining nobility of the Kingdom. Gloucester gets his wished for reconciliation with Edgar, although the “passion, joy and grief” of it causes his heart to burst. (5.iii.197) But Edgar offers the insight quoted above about their father’s blinding to his dying (bastard) brother Edmund, and Edgar accepts this view:

Thou’st spoken right. ‘Tis true;
The wheel is come full circle, I am here. (5.iii.172-3)

In the two sons’ views, then, their father got his just deserts for his sin with Edmund’s mother.

This is a harsh justice, and as seen in the last section ultimately repellent in its mode of delivery. In the Lear plot, the movement of justice goes further awry, producing painful injustices of its own. Perhaps he deserves to be turned out into the storm by the daughters that he has neglected, but there is no warrant for the murder of Cordelia in jail.
Edgar’s attempt to rationalize the outcome of the play in terms of justice is subverted by precisely the factors examined in the first section of the paper. The harms that Gloucester and Lear have done are not seen, but only reported briefly at the beginning of the play. The harms they suffer by it, however, are depicted in horrible detail. Moreover, they both learn and repent in their downfalls, and become steadily better men as new hardships are heaped upon them. The play is designed, as has been seen, to get the audience to side with them against the movement of justice in the play.

So the resolution of the Gloucester subplot, with justice delivered too enthusiastically, is no more satisfying than the end of the Lear mainplot, with not enough. A society governed by justice alone is as horrifying as one in which justice is largely absent. The structure of the play illustrates that both the worlds with too little and too much justice are unacceptable. Its wisdom is that we must strive for a balance in which at least a core of justice is preserved, but balanced and regulated by other values/virtues (not delivered by vice). In other words, it cannot be treated as the first virtue of social institutions, but most must be one among other, equally weighty, values.

Yet what candidates does the play offer? Here we may return for a hint to Lear in his lucid madness.

IV.

As Lear’s few remaining companions try to draw him away from contending with the fretful elements and into the shelter of a humble hovel, Lear pauses on the threshold and
begs a minute to pray. To this point, and indeed sometimes hereafter, he is consumed by his rage and grief and becomes obsessed with the terrible wrong he feels his older daughters have done him. But in this moment, Lear sees something else besides the way the storm affects his sense outrage and betrayal. He sees how it affects his companions, and indeed others like them throughout the kingdom, and this perception suggests a terrible insight about himself and his reign. Lear kneels and prays:

Poor naked wretches, whereso’er you are,  
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,  
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,  
Your loop’d and windowed raggedness, defend you  
From seasons such as these. Oh, I have ta’en  
Too little care of this. Take physic, pomp,  
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,  
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them  
And show the heavens more just. (3.iv.28-36)

Lear sees that he has been a poor King, not because he has not been just, but because he has shown too little care, especially for the most vulnerable citizens of Kingdom. He does not speak of his elder daughters who have treated him so cruelly at this point, or indeed of Cordelia, although he bitterly repents his cruelty to her elsewhere, but in each case the point in the same: Lear has denied them the love and care they are due from him. His subjects he has deprived throughout his reign, his elder daughters through their lives, and his youngest daughter suddenly at the point of his retirement and her engagement.

Gloucester, wandering in his blindness, also comes to most regret the care of which he, in the heat of rage, deprived his child. He tells an old man who tries to help him on his road that it is not his eyes he misses:
I have no way, and therefore want no eyes.
I stumbled when I saw. Full oft ‘tis seen
Our means secure us and our mere defects
Prove our commodities. O dear son Edgar,
The food of thy abused father’s wrath,
Might I but live to see thee in my touch,
I’d say I had eyes again. (4.i.20-6)

Indeed, in the very moment of his blinding Gloucester calls out to Edmund for help, only
to be informed that it was Edmund who betrayed him. And in this moment of supreme
torment his mind turns wholly to his other son:

O my follies! Then Edgar was abused?
King Gods, forgive me that and prosper him. (3.vii.90-1)

The value that Lear and Gloucester conjointly find in madness and blindness is love and
care, and it is their past failure to uphold this value that haunts them. On the political
side, Gloucester demonstrates more care than in his personal life and it is this that is his
character’s most memorable and heroic quality, although it has dire consequences for
him: “If I die for it – as no less is threatened me – the King my old master must be
relieved.” (3.iii.17-8) It is his willingness to countermand orders and to show care for the
King left out in the storm, and indeed his willingness to send the King to the invaders that
support his cause, that leaves him open to betrayal by Edmund. After his blinding,
Gloucester too is supported by an old retainer to who relieves him regardless of the risk.
Here we see Gloucester again at his best:

Away, get thee away; good friend, be gone.
Thy comforts can do me no good at all,
Thee, they may hurt. (4.i.16-8)

But the old man will have none of it, and goes with him until they find him a guide to
Dover, where Gloucester will again meet the King who he saved, and the son who he
longs to see.
It is of course love and care that bring Cordelia to England with the French army. As she puts it, linking love and justice,

No blown ambition doth our arms insight,  
But love, dear love, and our aged father’s right. (4.iv.27-8)

Later she charges her sisters not solely with cruelty to their father, but with lacking the kind of basic care that should be shown to anyone – indeed, anything: on the night of the storm, she says,

Mine enemies dog,  
Though he had bit me should have stood that night  
Against my fire. (4.vii.36-8)

It is similarly with love and care that she brings Lear back from his madness. When Lear awakes and recognizes her, he says

If you have poison for me, I will drink it.  
I know you do not love me, for your sisters have, as I do remember, done me wrong.  
You have some cause. They have not.

Cordelia: No cause, no cause. (4.vii.71-5)

Here love guides the pursuit of justice, leading to pity for her father and the necessity of stopping her sisters even if it means harming them. It is similarly love the causes Kent to follow the King despite his banishment – again a just act guided by love.

But probably the most striking and poignant invocation of love comes from Edmund as he lies dying of the wound that Edgar has administered. When he hears that Goneril has killed herself after having poisoned Regan, he remarks

Yet Edmund was beloved:  
The one the other poisoned for my sake,
And after slew herself. (5.iii.237-9)

And even as he dies this insight inspires him to attempt an act of good, and he informs Albany and the others of his order to kill Lear and Cordelia. That it is “being beloved”, even by such unworthy creatures as Regan and Goneril, that concerns him as he dies says a great deal about what has been missing in his life to date, and what it is that set him on his destructive path. His “now God stand up for bastards” is less driven by an unjust social stigma than the deprivation of his father’s love and care. His sense of justice, unguided by love and care, goes desperately off course. By the end he is not only complicit in his father’s blinding but also ultimately searches for him with the intention of killing him. Lear illustrates something similar in his worst moments, when in the Second Act he calls on “all-seeing justicers” to descend and savagely curse his ungrateful daughters. On the other hand, something similar is evident throughout in Regan and Goneril’s talk of justice: they were neglected children, grew up without a sense of love and care for their parents and fellow human beings, and hence are prey to a desperately skewed sense of justice as a mere mask of power – probably best exemplified in Goneril’s abuse of Albany for his lily-livered concerns about justice, in response to which he remarks “Wisdom and goodness to the vile seem vile.” (IV.2.41) Throughout the play Regan and Goneril are seen asserting rights without considerations without care for others (in sharp contrast with Kent or Cordelia, for example). When Lear protests “I gave you all” Regan dismisses his gift by asserting her right: “And in good time you gave it.” (II.2.438) Then the sisters go on to show why reason and justice militate against a retinue of a hundred knights, or indeed even one. Most strikingly, in the final scene when confronted with evidence of having plotted to murder her husband, Goneril acknowledges
the evidence but claims that here rights put her beyond the law: “Say if I do, the laws are mine, not thine./Who can arraign me for’t.” (V.3.156-7) Here her claim of her rights stand in direct defiance to conventional justice. So the play illustrates how demands of rights and justice go desperately awry when exercised without a framework of care or love.

The absence of care, and even love, has mangled the Lear household and the Gloucester household in similar ways. And the children who’ve been deprived of love grow up not only full of hostility, but incapable of loving, so that the harm they have experienced is reproduced in a new family unit. Edmund contracts himself to both Regan and Goneril without thinking very much of either of them, and the sisters fight and destroy one another in order to possess him. Regan and Goneril show no affection for their husbands, and of course Goneril plots to murder husband Albany. Obviously, they care nothing for their sister Cordelia and they also seek their father’s death. Edmund not only betrays his father to torture, and later attempts to kill him, but also betrays his brother who it appears has done him no harm. Without the guidance of mutual care, the claims of justice become mere instruments of power and revenge, which seem to erode in turn the very possibilities of care and compassion.

And just as the absence of care (and an overemphasis on justice) has damaged Lear’s household, so too has the lack of care mangled Lear’s kingdom. In the first scene we see it divided, and by Act III we hear of war brewing between its two halves. And then of course it is invaded by France in the name of its own king. It comes together
momentarily to fight off the invasion, only to have its two queens (its ultimate political leaders) destroy each other, and its two male leaders, Albany and Edmund, ready to fight a duel.

But perhaps the most memorable gesture of care is one both personal and political which comes from an unnamed servant who appears in only one scene, 3.vii, and dies. When his master and mistress, Cornwall and Regan, have ripped out one of Gloucester’s eyes, and are preparing to go after the second, he cries,

Hold your hand, my lord.

I have served you ever since I was a child,
But better service have I never done you
Than now to bid you hold. (3.vii.71-4)

The servant presents his action as one of concern for his master, who is committing an action that is both terribly wrong and will be greatly damaging to him. He is also presumably moved by care fore their host, Gloucester. But his action defies authority and puts his life at risk, and indeed will end it. Regan’s response too is eloquent: “how now, you dog?” Cornwall answers with his sword, and they fight. Regan grabs a sword from another and stabs the servant in the back. The servant’s action in this scene is highly expressive of justice guided by care, and yet is utterly unrecognizable to Regan as anything but a moment of inexplicable rebellion. Care and love are absent from her world, and the concerns of justice are no more than a mask for power.

In the opening scene of the play, during Lear’s dreary love contest, Cordelia says that she loves him “according to my bond, no more or less.” (1.i.93) She means of course that she
loves him as a daughter should, deeply but not worshipfully and to the exclusion of all else as her sisters claim. But her language here is pregnant. Balanced, reciprocal love is the bond that holds a family together. Care is the bond that holds a society together. And just as the nurturing of an environment of balanced love and support is the priority of family, so too does the play teach that the nurturing of an environment of mutual care is the priority of the political community.

Finally, it is only where justice appears guided by a sense of love in the family or care in the kingdom that appears to us as balanced and appropriate. The clearest case is probably Edgar saving his father from despair. This involves both deception that exploits his blindness, including permitting himself to think he is committing suicide by leaping from Dover cliff, and without the one thing that he tells Edgar he most wants – an opportunity to speak with Edgar himself and apologize. It is harsh medicine, and even in a sense a kind of punishment that Edgar administers, but balanced and appropriate because it is directed as he tells us to the goal of making Gloucester whole again, of reconciling him with a world of which he is despairing, of saving him. On the other hand, the tougher punishment he and Albany mete out to Edmund seems just not only because if is fairly and properly done (formal accusation and trial by combat), but also because part of the intention is to prevent further damage to the Kingdom (as well as attaining some retribution for his many victims who cannot attain it themselves). So too does Cordelia’s French invasion of England, to save her father, seem a just cause (even in the eyes of many English) along with her forgiveness of him, which helps to return him to sanity.
In essence then, it is only when it is modulated by a sense of care (of other citizens) or love (of family), that justice is presented positively and constructively in the play. In these circumstances, it seems to suggest, justice plays a crucial role in guiding humane treatment. But only when it is guided by a condition of care or love – that is, only in a certain type of community that shares a deep bond of reciprocal concern. In essence, it is care (of fellow citizens) and love (of family) - that is, the character of the community and its reciprocal relations – that is the essential and prior condition for the effective pursuit of justice. So in contrast to Rawls, Shakespeare suggests that the first, or at least an equal, virtue of social institutions, just as with the family, is something more like an ethos of mutual care, and it is only in such a context that justice can find its significance.

V.

Finally, the play seems to contest the liberal notion that the public life, with its demands of justice, can be separated off and sharply distinguished from the sources of justice in private life. Lear’s story exemplifies the intimate and indivisible intertwining of the personal and political. Lear’s purpose from the beginning is precisely to establish a separation between the political and the personal, and to proceed into a personal retirement having justly provided for his daughters, his kingdom and himself. His purpose can in a sense be described as quintessentially liberal – to establish by law a realm of negative liberty, where the state cannot intrude upon him. His project from the beginning is to

Shake all cares and business from his age,
Conferring them on younger strengths, while we
Uburdened crawl toward death. (1.i.38-40)
They play essentially chronicles the utter failure of this project. On one hand, politics pursues him into his private life, as they reverse his legacy and undo his laws, intruding on his sacred personal sphere, eliminating his retinue and seeking to subordinate him wholly to their personal authority. The play illustrates that personal space of any kind is in fact an artifice of the state and exists only as long as there is a political will to sustain it. The realm of privacy, in other words, is premised on a certain kind of public order, and so requires an active engagement with public life if it is to remain secure. When the state invades the private, as furtive and small a creature as poor Tom becomes an agent of political change, helping to save Lear in the storm and then leading Gloucester to Dover where we are told the piteous sight raises the country against Goneril and Reagan.

On the other hand, the underlying motives of his daughters’ political decisions – Cordelia as much as Regan and Goneril are deeply personal. Regan and Goneril seek Lear’s death (as Gloucester puts it) through the very neglect that he has shown them. Cordelia prevails upon her husband the French King to invade England, if she is to be believed, for love of her father. The French King agrees for love of Cordelia. And the same is true of those around them. Kent perhaps is the most obvious case. He defies Lear’s banishment to continue to serve and protect Lear anyway. At the other extreme, Edmund’s ferocious ambition for power and success, we see from Act 1, scene ii, is fuelled by a deep resentment of his private illegitimacy. His aim is that “Edmund the base shall top the legitimate [Edgar].” (1.ii.20-1)
Moreover, all of the persons depicted in the play exhibit the same character, whether
good or bad, in their political gestures as in their private lives. Goneril, for example, is as
coldly deceptive in plotting to kill her husband as she was in lying to maximize her
inheritance or in stripping Lear of his retinue. Kent is as blunt and loyal to the old king in
beating Oswald as he is in delivering Lear’s message to Cornwall and Regan. Politics, in
Lear, is intimately and irreducibly bound up with the personal.

The predictable disaster of Lear’s project - resulting in his own madness and death, and
the decimation of his kingdom - illustrates the impossibility of trying to divide the
political from the domain of the private person, and to insulate it from the influence of
the conviction, background, and character of citizens – in order to assure the primacy of
impersonal justice.

VI.

Read King Lear in this way provides a critique of justice as the primary value in public
life, suggesting that justice only finds its proper balance when modulated through a spirit
of community – that is, of mutual care and concern among citizens. Otherwise, one is
threatened with too harsh an application of justice – as in the final movements of the
Gloucester subplot (i.e., his exile) – or too little – as in the Lear mainplot. Moreover, the
demands of justice unguided by a prior condition of mutual concern tend to undermine
the common sense of community, both within the family and within the kingdom, leading
to deepening division and conflict. The truly subversive insight that Lear suggests can
then be summarized in the idea that justice is not the primary condition of a healthy
community, but one among others. The communal precondition of mutual concern is an at least equally fundamental concern of public life.

If this critique of justice is the theme, or at least one of the important themes, of *King Lear* then the play may be argued to lend a degree of support to concerns that have been raised by some recent communitarian critics of liberalism. Charles Taylor has criticized liberal theories like Rawls’ justice as fairness because they address citizens juridically as rights-bearers rather than as individuals embedded in a unique political community pursuing projects of mutual concern. He raises a concern in particular that considerations of justice in the abstract may be insufficient to motivate citizens to continue to uphold key liberal political institutions like the welfare state. His point of course is not that principles of justice are irrelevant, but that there is an equally profound need for citizens to recognize and become concerned with one another as participants in a “common form of life” whose “continuance and flourishing matters to citizens for its own sake.” (Taylor 1985: 213) Correspondingly, Taylor and Sandel argue that a “politics of the common good” should guide the pursuit of justice. Similarly, Michael Walzer argues that justice should be interpreted within the framework of a given historical community, and that attempts to frame the demands of justice in more abstract terms tend to undermine the very sense of community which allows justice to be effectively pursued. (Walzer 1983) In short, these communitarian critics of liberalism hold that the pursuit of justice needs to be framed and guided by a prior commitment of concern to the health and welfare of particular political communities and the members thereof. This sounds very much like
Lear’s lucid moment of self-revelation on the heath (especially in-so-far as Taylor, for example, connects this concern with the sustenance of welfare policies).

Still, if King Lear can be argued to prefigure some recent communitarian concerns about liberal overemphasis on justice, it is not wholly clear what, if anything, it can add to their arguments. For one thing, liberals may certainly respond that in King Lear Shakespeare was examining the personal and political dynamics of a Kingdom that has little in common with modern liberal democracies and their political concerns. Indeed, it is doubtful that Lear’s Kingdom has any historical referent. More importantly, monarchy by its nature is a personal form of rule, and so it is natural that the failings of Lear’s kingdom would also be wrapped up with his personal failings. But this insight regarding good and bad kingship does not necessarily resonate with modern bureaucratic, liberal-democratic states. Moreover, the sense of justice that is being examined in King Lear is much thinner (closer to criminal justice) than modern liberal conceptions of justice, which may themselves be argued to express a kind of mutual concern – an equality of concern and respect for all citizens.

These are fair points. But it may also be significant that King Lear still speaks to us as powerfully as it does, and that its themes of the failure of personal concern leading to a collapse of order and justice within the family and within the nation continue to resonate. Moreover, it is perhaps not coincidental that these themes have been powerfully taken up by new voices in our own day. And while it may be true that the liberal principles of justice that are at issue today are far richer than those examined in Lear, it seems to me
that this observation does not answer the issue raised in the play – that unless justice is
guided by some deeper personal commitment, it cannot hold either our approval or our
allegiance. Indeed, it may be that part of the reason for the play’s enormous and
widespread popularity is that Shakespeare speaks a truth about at least most people in
most places. To paraphrase the talking heads, it isn’t really justice or freedom that we
want primarily, but love.

