

Menschenwürde: “To keep base life afoot”¹ Reading Shakespeare's King Lear in our times

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Abstract

The essay reads William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of King Lear* in the light of bio-ethical debates, and the conceptual centrality of Kantian ideas of human dignity, *Menschenwürde*. *King Lear* compels the contemporary audience-reader to re-view European Humanist traditions from a critical vantage where things fall apart, and the very significations of the 'human' cannot hold. The post-World War II world recognises more acutely, that the human as dignity, as non-exchangeable *würde* is perhaps true only in its violation. An awareness of the emergent dignity debates (that are often defined as posthumanist) helps recognise the astonishingly modern quality of Shakespeare's tragedy.

The great humanist speculations of 15th-16th century Europe that engage with human-animal signification slippages, with signification-slippages between *dignitas* as a socio-political rank, and dignity as an essential ethical worth shapes Shakespeare's play. Such criticality is set in motion as soon as Lear, the king/father/elder person (already imbued with dignity-as-outside rank, in the Elizabethan world order) sells his 'dignity as love' for a price. His daughters Goneril and Regan snatch this opportunity to divest the 'old fool' of both kinds of dignity. Cordelia and Kent stand aside in silence and disbelief as this horrible travesty of humanity-dignity is played out in the court. The rest of the play is about dignity- erasure rituals, spectacular humiliations, and increasing slippages between the human-animal, the animal as human; the human as rational, and the human-animal in *déraison* and senility.

The action of the play is about transpositions, refractions, resonances as the humiliations of one (say Kent) are redoubled in another (say Gloucester); the animality of one (say the Fool) as resonating in an Other (say, Lear). The *Tragedy of King Lear* is after all about the perilous condition of the human.

Keywords : *William Shakespeare, The Tragedy of King Lear, Menschenwürde, dignity, Renaissance Humanism, Immanuel Kant, humiliations, ethics, bio-politics, the human-animal, madness-déraison, women in Shakespeare's world.*

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This essay began as thought-sharing with my doctoral students in the Central University of Jammu (the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir, with Ladakh as a separate territory, in India now), in a course on bioethics. It is further textured by my lived experience in a region that is informed by its military culture, its history of conflicts, its debates about respect-violation of human dignity, its contested position within a nation state.

I

I read an early modern text, Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of King Lear* (1606)² in the light of contemporary bio-ethical debates, within questions of human worth, and punctuated renewals of Kantian ideas of *menschenwürde*. Scholars³ point out that Immanuel Kant's formulations about the human that cannot be instrumentalised, about human dignity as an end in itself, were deeply informed by Stoic (especially those of Cicero)⁴, and Renaissance humanist formulations (especially those of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, 1463-1494).⁵ It is probable that Shakespeare had some access to those debates as well.⁶ Situating an Elizabethan tragedy within a Kantian framework, within European Enlightenment and 'secularised' debates regarding what constitutes the human, elicits some uncomfortable responses, and my essay traces those discomforts.

This essay contends that while worth/worthy are key words of *King Lear* and repeated with endless variations, such human *würde* worth-dignity is immanent only in its obverse, its violations; in its foregrounding of transactional relations between persons; in denying human beings of their intrinsic worth; in their brutal instrumentalisation, and in the playing out of those spectacular rituals of humiliations. My reading of *King Lear* explores questions of human dignity in tracing the complex semiotics of such violations.

Dignity is intrinsic to a rational being, as respect is relational to dignity.⁷ Recognition, care, taking cognizance of an Other and human *würde*-dignity are coterminous.²⁸ In *King Lear* moments of recognition, respect, care of an Other are so fleeting, fragile, and transient that the conceptual significations of *menschenwürde* in *King Lear* appears to have been produced by its violations.

Kantian, debates and their punctuated renewals in a post- World War II thought world :

The punctuated renewals of Kantian ideas in the modern world may be

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witnessed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the newly constituted United Nations Organisation, and in its 'recognition of the inherent dignity and inalienable rights of all members of the human family [...]'.⁹ These discursive revisitations at the end of the World War II, were in response to the gross violations (on a global and unprecedented scale) of human dignity, whether in European colonizing endeavours of Afro-Asian continents; or/and racial violations and ethnic cleansing pogroms in Europe and Americas. Generally ascribed to the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, *Menschenwürde* translates as human worth or human dignity. Kant's much quoted lines about non-transactional *würde*, intrinsic *dignitas* is expressed in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* that I quote, to illumine the thrust of my essay.¹⁰

The respect I bear others or which another can claim from them is the acknowledgement of the dignity (*dignitas*) of another man, i.e., a worth which has no price, no equivalent for which the object of valuation could be exchanged¹¹

Würde for Kant refers to human dignity and an innate, immutable, intrinsic worth that is in distinction to the idea of price or exchange value. Human beings are a value in themselves and therefore beyond estimate or price. As Kant notes:

What is related to general human inclinations and needs has a *market price*; that which, even without presupposing such a need, conforms with a certain taste has a *fancy price*; but that which constitutes the condition under which alone something can be an end in itself has not merely a relative value, that is, a price, but an inner value, that is, *dignity*. Morality, and humanity insofar as it is capable of morality, is that which alone has dignity.¹²

Kant posits the famous distinction between human beings and things/objects/animals noting that while the latter can be instrumentalised as they are non- or a-rational, the former cannot, as they possess reason and are dignified by the same:

Now I say that the human being and in general every rational being *exists* not merely as a means to be used by this or that will at its discretion; instead he must in all his actions always be regarded *at the same time as an end* [...] Humanity itself is a dignity¹³

Social rank, economic worth, beauty, health, youth and all other external markers do not dignify a human being more, just as the lack of these

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signifiers may not reduce that innate *würde*. Human beings cannot be estimated, priced or exchanged as they possess reason. Humanity itself is a dignity, and is as such, inviolate.

By the same relentless logic, animals (and by implication, other non-human creatures, and human beings on the margins of reason, the 'abnormal' the invalid, the 'senile') can be instrumentalised, that is used as means to an end, but a rational being is an end in herself.

The British philosopher Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*¹⁴ refutes the Kantian position ('the respect I beg others of, or which another can claim from me is the acknowledgement of the dignity of another man that is the worth which has no price') and asserts that all beings have a price or exchange value:

The value or worth of a man, is, as of other things, his price; that is to say, so much as would be given for the use of his Power; and therefore it is not absolute; but a thing dependent on the need and judgment of another. The publique worth of a man, which is the Value set on him by the Commonwealth, is that which men commonly call dignity.¹⁵

This debate regarding innate dignity and entitlement of rational beings is enriched by Jeremy Bentham's intervention regarding a sentient beings' capacity to suffer. The scope of human entitlement and dignity are by the same logic, denied to beings in the state of *déraison* (madness, abnormality, loss of reason); to animals and other a-rational sensate beings.

Bentham inquires as to what is it that would distinguish a dignified being and one that is not: 'what else is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason, or perhaps, the faculty for discourse?' Bentham notes that

a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day, or a week, or even a month, old. But suppose the case were otherwise, what would it avail?¹⁶

The question then, as Bentham puts it is not, 'can they reason? nor, can they talk? but, can they suffer?' These complex and multidirectional debates and intersecting positions vary from; (1) human beings as imbued with rational consciousness, possessing innate dignity and thereby being an end in themselves; (2) that such *würde* is coterminous with recognition and respect of an Other, (3) that obversely, human beings possess instrumental not intrinsic value, come with price tags that vary according to their

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external positions/situation(s) and therefore can be bartered; (4) and that human/dignity rights may be extended to all sensate beings as they have the capacity to feel, to suffer. It is within this complex discursive matrix that I situate my reading of *King Lear*.

Contemporary bio-ethical issues stem from similar considerations of human worth, dignity, price, entitlement, but such debates have been enriched/coloured by the lived experiences of human brutality that was coterminous with the colonial exercise, the institution of racial hierarchies, systems of apartheid or separateness, exclusion. Many of the bio-ethical theories came to be formulated when Europeans directed attacks against themselves as 'society had to be defended' from both outside and inside. The unleashing of Judeophobia in the 1930s Europe and other minority group witch-hunting, monstrous acts of 'natural selection', the extermination of 'lower races' in Nazi camps, set patterns that were to be followed and bettered by the contemporary world. The systemic dehumanization/extermination of Rohingyas of Rakhine in Myanmar are punctuated renewals of such dignity-violating logic.

Bio-ethical debates have assumed a far greater relevance with the development of technology that aims at optimising human life, and exterminating that what is expendable. The dignity of human choice in procreation that is threatened by human cloning; in use of alternative wombs, in choice of sperm donors; in harvesting and selling of human organs; in sex selection methods are some of the older practices that bioethics engages with. The systemic rendering of minorities as stateless, and exploiting their labour and sexual productivity as slave labour are those newer areas of governmentality that, bio-ethics focuses upon. All such decisions are predicated on whom one considers human, and worthy of innate dignity, and whom one excludes from human entitlement, and as merely instrumental.

Arendt, Foucault, Agamben, Coetzee: contemporary bio-ethical debates as re-iterations of the Kantian debate

The essay on *King Lear* is also in conversation with more contemporary ideologues, and those that gave the human-dignity debates a new turn such as Hannah Arendt in her *Origins of Totalitarianism*;¹⁷ Michel Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (London: Allen Lane, 1977), *The History of Sexuality* Transl. Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books 1978 (vol. 1) 1985 (vol.2) 1986 (vol. 3); in lectures turned essays

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such as *Society Must Be Defended* (New York: Picador, 2003); *The Birth of Biopolitics* (New York: Picador, 2010), *Abnormal* (London: Verso, 2003); in Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* Tr. Daniell Heller-Roazen, (California: Stanford University Press, 1998) and *Open: Man and Animal* (California: Stanford University Press, 2003).

While Arendt traces how the rendering minorities stateless, was the first step towards dehumanizing and denying them human rights within modern nation states; Foucault describes modern governmentality as the operation of biopolitics, of instrumentalising not just individuals but of an entire people, a race, a populace. Foucault describes the bio-political order as one where human population is always demarcated, with regard to economic and political pertinence by an ever mobile, unstable caesura. The person or group that is pertinent today could turn non-pertinent in the next, as the parameters of pertinence are shifting, arbitrary and constituted by power.

The unborn female foetus is not pertinent because it is not a male; the Jew is not pertinent because she is not an Aryan, the Muslim is not pertinent because she is not Christian; the Hindu is not pertinent because she is not Muslim; the aged are not pertinent because they are not young; the Dalit is not pertinent because she is not *savarna*-in-caste; the immigrant is not pertinent because she is not a national. These are situations that are both culture specific as well as globally relevant. These are both shifting categories as well as fixed and immutable. This caesura that marks a person, a populace out as instrumental; as having an exchange price moves relentlessly to squeeze them out of their last drop till the time when they are, in the words of Primo Levi, 'muselvanized' (*If this is a Man*)¹⁸ reduced to living corpses; reduced to bodily functions till their bodily extinction. It is the movement of this mobile caesura ensuring greater productivity and pertinence that Foucault describes as bio-politics.

Agamben revisits the Kantian debate and Enlightenment distinctions between human and animal in both *Homo Sacer* where he distinguishes between the human *bios* and the thing like *zoe*, taking the Arendtian descriptions of statist dehumanizing to their logical end. In his *Open* he reveals the close nexus and dynamic interanimations between human and animal.

To revert to the original debate does a person that has no means of economic sustenance; that is physically unfit, diseased; that is aged;

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mentally deranged; that is reduced to bodily functions, still possess dignity? This is a question that I engage with in my reading of *King Lear*. Can a person that is brutalised, humiliated, tortured, imprisoned, raped, have dignity? Or can such a person even claim humanity? When humanity and dignity are about exclusions, and such exclusions are informed by power operations, can *Menschenwürde* that is an ideal, be at all relevant?

I propose reading *King Lear* by exploring the conceptual genealogy of *Menschenwürde*. One of the earliest uses of *Menschenwürde* is to be discovered in Schiller's play *Don Carlos*. A protagonist of the play, Marquis of Posa, rejects an offer of an influential and powerful position in the court of the Spanish King, Philip II. Astounded by this unforeseen refusal, the King cannot help but suspect a particularly clever kind of flattery. Posa responds with:

I am well aware sire of how low and mean you regard human dignity. Seeing a free man's speech, merely as a mean trick of a flatterer and I presume you know why you are entitled to think so. Men forced you into it since they voluntarily gave up their *Menschenwürde*. They voluntarily descended into this low rank.¹⁹

A comparison between Posa's reaction and Cordelia's refusal to put a price, an exchange value on her innate dignity is only appropriate.

Reading *King Lear* in the light of such debates is apposite given that the play begins with transactions, prices and prizes, as Lear chooses to 'sell' his kingdom, his dignity, his *würde* (within the cultural definitions of such elevations in the Elizabethan world) as King/father/elderly man for a price. This price is the quantum of his daughters' professions/declaration of love for him.

The daughters are quick to compute their 'love' for Lear, compare them to material things. Goneril describes her love in terms of "matter" that words can hardly prefigure, "weild" (I.i). Regan follows her sister's suit in declaring 'I am made of that self-same mettle as my sister/And prize me at her worth' to express the quantum of her love for her father and draw an opulent portion of the kingdom in so declaring. When Cordelia uses the word that cannot figure love, 'nothing' Lear responds with a Hobbseian 'nothing will come of nothing.' After rejecting Cordelia, he describes her (to the Duke of Burgundy) as once having a price 'when she was dear to us', and that 'now her price has fallen, as that she comprises of 'little seeming substance.' The King of France describes Cordelia as 'Unprized

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precious maid' in (I.1). Questions of worth and prize take on darker hues as Albany's late realisation of Goneril's nature finds expression in 'O Goneril/You are not worth the dust which the rude wind blows in your face [...].' By the end of the play Cordelia admits that every 'measure'- price would fail even if she 'live[d] and work[ed]/ to match' Kent's goodness and selfless love for Lear. Things come to a full circle, as Kent assumes Cordelia's earlier position that love cannot be quantified, and that such measure-price has been 'overpaid' (IV.vii).²⁰

Indignity rituals as spectacles

Shakespeare's play relentlessly explores meaning of human only to discover its ever-receding horizons. It discovers at every turn even more radical, even more inclusive answers as all the while, such meanings related to humanity and innate dignity are brutally desecrated. The play is about spectacular affirmations of being human, and its equally spectacular violations. I am not deploying the word 'spectacularly' in a sort of random, and inflationary manner. I discover something innately stagey, spectacular about the dignity-violation events in *King Lear*.

One could very well argue that *King Lear* is a play because of its performative dimension, and thereby constitutive of 'spectacular' or stagey events. However, taking this stagey-ness of Shakespearean plays and *King Lear* in particular, as given, a quantum of excess in so far as acts of dignity-violation are concerned, and that requires examination.

The morally polarised world of *King Lear* fits the stereotypicalisations of English Moralities, rather than the complex character-plot interanimations of late Elizabethan Tragedies. The evil characters firmly subscribe to the Hobbesian principle of human instrumentality; and the Foucaultian idea of bio-political pertinence. These characters put an estimate on every relationship and see not an old and over-fond father but simply an opportunity to divest an old fool, of his power and wealth. Goneril and Regan flatter Lear so long as he is pertinent and dispose him off, the moment he is not. The Lear action is repeated in the life of Gloucester. The moment these old fools have parted with their value and estimate and Lear initiates this process by voluntarily giving away his land and army and, in effect, his power— Goneril, Regan and Edmund initiate the process of humiliating them, reminding them at each step that they are old fools. In short, they are no longer human, and therefore, no longer deserve humane treatment.

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In bio-political terms, Lear has outlived his pertinence and must be reduced to mere bodily functions. Therefore, the riotous time that he has with his hundred knights – and several performances interpret 'not-to-be-endured riots'(I.iv) as disruptive behaviour including sexual excesses, are pleasures that Goneril and Regan are not going to allow an old man. An old person should be confined to the corner of a room, consume his food and medicines with the least possible fuss, and die quickly. As the person no longer has a price or exchange value, she is best when invisible.

However, I return to my original and uncomfortable point that the indignities, the humiliations meted out to Lear are disproportionate, to say the least, excessive. Also, the spectacular humiliation is visited upon the body of the old King are cumulative and done through transpositions. There are several Lear clones, or Lear extensions. There is Kent, the Fool, Gloucester, Edgar, and then there is Cordelia. The humiliations are not just visited on Lear *per se* but redirected, deferred, deflected, or dispersed. All humiliations such as the blinding of Gloucester, or the putting of Kent into stocks and the final strangulation of Cordelia add up, swell up like a gigantic, exponentially multiplying body of humiliations.

When Kent is put in stocks, Gloucester notes that 'the King must take it ill,/That he,[is] so slightly valued in his messenger'(Act II.ii). Examine the statement that 'he,[is] so slightly valued in his messenger' carefully. Gloucester, like Lear (when he was King) and Goneril participate willingly in this economy of exchange. The question of value, of estimate or the notion of price is clear in such statements. To put Kent in stocks is to humiliate Lear by extension. The inchoate and anguished cry of Lear 'Who put my man i' th'stocks?'(II.iv.) is an affirmation that Kent in stocks is only an extension of Lear's body and a redoubling of Lear's agony because such insult and injury is directed at someone he loves and honours.

The ghastly bearding and blinding of Gloucester are, even by contemporary standards of human dignity-violation rites, horrific. Gloucester's torture is a transposition of Lear's suffering as the former is seen as a Lear loyalist. Gloucester's response (to Regan's interrogation as to why he has 'despatched the lunatic king') that he wanted to save Lear from 'her cruel nails/pluck[ing] out his poor eyes' (III.vii.59) is prophetic. Regan proceeds to squelch Gloucester's second eye after the first eye with a chilling 'one side will mock another[...]' hinting at Gloucester as an extension of Lear (III.vii.70).

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The turning out of Lear into a stormy night, unprotected and uncovered is only a culmination of these transposed humiliations and not half as painful. The final humiliation and injury does, however, lead to Lear's fundamental realizations regarding the innate worth of the human animal. The human, Lear realises, is a bare forked thing, and even less than animals in such limited bare situations. It is a mere vulnerable, perishable body. Without the accretions of crown, coat and fur there is no rank-dignity. There is no inside of 'dignity'. It is all an outside of 'price.' It is the moment of utter collapse of the Kantian ideal of innate dignity.

II

Human and non-human animal, déraison and Lear

Goneril and Regan, though seemingly Hobbesian, can, however, claim a Kantian position when it suits them and when they must defend their actions within a culture geared toward respecting the father, the king, the elderly person. They justify their restraining and humiliating of Lear, on the grounds that Lear has lost innate human qualities reason, good sense, and morality (and these become coeval). Babies, old fools and mad men do not merit humane treatment because they are situated beyond the pale of reason.

Such discourses are initiated the moment Lear has handed over his kingdom to his daughters. Regan ascribes Lear's rejection of Cordelia to 'the infirmity of his age' concluding that 'he hath ever/but slenderly known himself' and Goneril describes Lear's 'unruly waywardness' as brought about by 'the infirm and choleric years.' These initial speculations will help them build up their case for declaring Lear as beyond the pale of reason and therefore undeserving of humane treatment. These hints assume a full-fledged discursive strength as Regan distinguishes between Goneril in possession of reason 'she shows what she does' as against the Lear 'with passion' who must be 'content to think you old.' (II.iv.236-239). Lear's actual slide into a state of *déraison* is a culmination of such power laced descriptions for 'O, that way madness lies' (III.iv.17).

The non-evolved, early Lear also subscribes to the Hobbesian logic when he resents the stripping a king and a father of his accretions, his knights, his pleasures, his social dignity. Lear's dignity by his own protestations is not innate but constitutive of those excesses:

O! reason not the need; our basest beggars/Are in the poorest thing
superfluous:/Allow not nature more than nature needs, /Man's life is cheap

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as beast's (II.ii.62-65).

That cheap state of *déraison*, that liminal, terrifying condition of being where one inhabits human form but as-unrecognisable-as-human body, is slowly and surely foregrounded. Lear stands disgraced, reviled by his daughters, in unmanly tears ('women's weapons, water drops/stain my man's cheeks' II.iv.280-282) almost in the way 'that madness lies.' Edgar, another of Lear-Gloucester transpositions, transforms into Tom O' Bedlam, 'mad beings' common in English countryside,²¹ describing in graphic detail, that animal-in-human, human-in-animal state.

To take the basest and most poorest shape/
That ever penury, in contempt of
man/ Brought near to beast: my face I'll grime with filth:/
Blanket my loins;
elf all my hair in knots; and with presented nakedness
out face the sky/...
Of Bedlam beggars (II.iii.7-14).

Lear is one play that thrives on the conceptual slippages between the human, and the non-human animal. Kent picks up a quarrel with Oswald as the latter is slavish like a dog ('Knowing nought, like dogs, but following'). When thrust into stocks by Goneril as punishment, Kent responds with an anguished 'Why, madam, if I were your father's dog, You should not use me so.'

The Fool that is conceptually nearer to such human-animal slippages recognises Kent, who now 'wears cruel garters,' and is closer to '[h]orses' that 'are tied by the heads, dogs and bears by the neck, monkeys by the loins, and men by the legs' (II.iv).

This is why the play could be read (and is meant to be read) alongside its posthumanist recastings, as in J.M. Coetzee's father-daughter novel *Disgrace*. Coetzee's narrative begins at a point where Lear ends: 'why should a dog, a horse a rat have life and thou none at all!' (V.iii.305). A disgraced David Lurie (a Lear recast) the protagonist in *Disgrace* is content to live just like a dog.²²

While *Lear* is one play that uses animal images, especially that of a dog as examples of 'keeping base life afoot,' it also radically reexamines the animality in humans, the human-animal, the *mensch-tier*.²³ Lear slides into the self-predicted state of cheap, expendable bestiality very rapidly. Turned out on a stormy night without even a cover he discovers himself and human life itself as a bare forked thing. Raving, unassembled, and in a state of contra-human *déraison*, he is no longer entitled to humane treatment, bereft as he is of dignity in the most fundamental sense of the word. He is

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naked not because he has thrown away his vestigial clothes-cover, but because he has lost the cover of human reason:

Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou ow'st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! ... thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come; unbutton here (III.iv.100-107).

All that Lear alone and the composite body of Lear may claim now is humane sympathy not because 'it' possesses reason but because 'it' suffers like sensate beings. The question of human rights has come down to a plea for cessation of suffering 'here I stand, your slave,/ A poor, infirm, weak, and despis'd old man'(III.ii.19-20). And we are reminded that the 'homoferus [...] is also and above all the slave, the barbarian, and the foreigner, [...] figures of an animal in human form'²⁴

Brief moments of human society are envisioned, even in the midst of every violation of human values, as the drenched-by-tempests, Tom O' Bedlam (Edgar in disguise as a mad man), the Fool, and the deranged King, huddle together seeking shelter/comfort for each other in deepest compassion and in recognition of essential human dignity. This is however a minimalist utopia as Goneril, Regan and Edmund are at their heels to hunt and kill Lear's party. They have waged war on the 'foreign aggressors' Cordelia-France albeit the fact that such foreign army comes to redeem Lear. Even after news of France's defeat, the old king projects a minimalist utopia, a future life of togetherness that he and his daughter Cordelia will enjoy, even in a state of defeat and incarceration. The father and daughter he believes, will, 'sing like birds i' the cage, gossip of "who's in, who's out"', whiling their days in the comfort of nothing but the fact that they are alive and together (V.iii). This fleeting dream too, is ruptured as Cordelia is hanged by a hired assassin, even as Lear gives a death blow to the killer. Lear's death is neither a resolved nor heroic one, but riddled with irresolutions regarding his beloved Cordelia's life.

Humiliations: Who Humiliates Whom

I conclude this essay by referring to the issue of humiliation as violating and unhinging the very idea of humanity; as violating the dignity that constitutes humanity. Humiliation can and often does have something innately stagey about it because it functions under the sign of excess. It attacks and demolishes structures and hierarchies. Humiliations have

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symbolic connotations and are almost always culturally situated communicative acts. The public scolding of Lear and the reduction of his retinue by a woman; and a young woman who is his daughter, and who was only lately his subject, is a desecration of socially and culturally condoned structures. The restraining of Kent in stocks (meant to confine socially and economically inferior beings); the bearding of Gloucester by a young woman (the beard being a signifier of mature masculinity) are deeply humiliating because they are violations (and public display of such violations) of social rank, entitlement and hierarchy.

It is not insignificant that four hundred years later, rituals of humiliation have retained these patterns of excess. So Muslim men (detainees in camps such as Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay) have been humiliated and terrorised by 'non/sub-human' creatures such as dogs; been beaten up, forced to strip, copulate and crawl and be led by dog-collars by women guards.

One returns to consider the humiliation rituals (and their excesses) of the early modern text in question. Given that such texts are historically embedded within power hierarchies; and where women, dependent siblings, social inferiors are systemically demeaned and excluded from the definitions of 'human'²⁵ one cannot but notice that *King Lear* is merely a study in humiliation rituals but in their excesses. Why is *King Lear* an exploration of spectacular, incommensurate torture, humiliation, and dignity violations, given that humiliation rituals are by nature excessive, stagey?

Is it because the dignity of Lear as a father, as a king, as a nobleman and an older man is culturally sanctioned and inviolate so far as the Elizabethan world goes? If negation is the motor of history, then Lear's humiliation, or Gloucester's humiliation or Kent's humiliation is so violent, excessive, that it appears to negate itself by its very incommensurability. The humiliation of a father, an old man and a King are so not culturally sanctioned and therefore in the Elizabethan world, that by humiliating them, (and in a spectacular way) Edmund or Goneril or Regan produce the opposite effect.

The action of the play proves that Lear, Kent and Gloucester continue to operate as signifiers of respect and sympathy till the end. It is only a matter of time when the universally reviled Goneril, Regan and the illegitimate Edmund (and their wicked cohorts) will be punished, and the

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scrambled social order restored. What these spectacular humiliations do is that they effectively invisibilise, disperse those exclusions that are culturally sanctioned and normative. Those are the unheard voices in Shakespeare's plays.

King Lear opens with Gloucester's bragging about the woman he used for sexual sports, and disposed of when the fun was over and she had conceived of a child, within the hearing distance of his 'illegitimate child.' The humiliation of Gloucester's absent wife (Edgar's mother), and mistress (Edmund's mother) are not only invisibilised; they are also, in effect, socially sanctioned. The humiliation of women having price tags of dowry and being bargained for by men who profess to 'love' them in a public court is seen as normal and normative. The old father's indecent demands for exchange price of the dowry that he will pay that is demand for public display and protestations of love from his daughters-subjects is condoned as mere folly. The only person who refuses to participate in this economy of exchange and barter that is Cordelia who is cast aside as callously as disposable object.

In an Elizabethan world, the woman is not. She does not possess a subject position or agency and cannot therefore, conceptually speaking, humiliate a male. Such attempts (the woman humiliating the man) only serve to strengthen and legitimize patriarchal hierarchies, and the unequal power relations of such a society. Goneril and Regan are proved to be monsters and it is something that the world of *King Lear* had already known about women. Edmund is proved to be a villain and this is exactly what the legitimate world makes of an illegitimate being. Lear's ravings about the terrible and terrifying sexuality of women only bring to the forefront, a deep-seated misogyny that characterises and informs the Elizabethan world.

A final word on humiliation rituals. Is spectacular humiliation also a desired form of recognition? Lear's love contest is a display of undignified exhibitionism and the innately dignified characters such as Cordelia and Kent clearly resent such displays. The resentment is because they see humanity as dignity and refuse to participate in this economy of exchange. Lear's insistence on a love contest is the expression of a deep-seated anxiety regarding losing parental and kingly control and power. It is an anxiety that I witness in most father figures in Shakespeare's plays. Such anxiety is most on display, when they must transfer their property (their daughters) to their

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husbands and accede to the act of marriage. Lear's insecurities surface and explode at a moment when he is handing over his daughters to other men and when they accept these women (worthless otherwise) in lieu of a price a dowry. We witness similar tensions in father figures especially in plays like *The Tempest*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at moments when they must hand over their daughters, their property to their husbands, other men. In *The Merchant of Venice* it is the dead father's fiat that is worked out through the casket-recognising contest.

I conclude my rather eclectic discussion with a reverting to and refocusing of a Kantian moment. These lines about innate human worth and innate human worth of a woman (that is 'not' in an Elizabethan world) comes from France:

Love is not love/When it is mingled with regards that stand/Aloof from
th'entire point./Will you have her?/She is herself a dower (I.i.237-240).

Used thus, dignity designates a value not conferred or created by human choices, individual or collective, but as prior to human attribution. I take my cue from France while deliberating upon unheard voices in Shakespeare's plays. In a world where the concept-word 'human' is jealously guarded; its signification-access increasingly denied to majority of humans on every pretext, *King Lear* enables us to resignify, reoccupy the human that is dignity that is love.

Endnotes :

- 1 All citations are from *The Arden Shakespeare, King Lear* ed. Nicholl Smith (London and New York: D.C. Heath and Co, 1972);II.iv.218.
- 2 Refer to the “Introduction: The date of the play” in the Arden edition and controversies regarding the date of *The Tragedy of King Lear* (2, viii-x).
- 3 Refer to Oliver Sensen's *Kant on Human Dignity* (Germany, Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2011).
- 4 Cicero uses 'dignity' as moral essence that demarcates humans and animals. He significantly, extends dignity as a quality common to human kind, rather than as informing (and thereby distinguishing) persons of exceptional social rank and elevation, as was the culturally accepted use of *dignitas* in Roman society. '[...] And if we will only bear in mind the superiority and dignity (*dignitas*) of our nature, we realise how wrong it is to abandon ourselves to excess and live in luxury and voluptuousness [...]' (Tr. by W. Miller, Cicero, *De Officiis* 1913, Book I, Chapter XXX, 106).

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- 5 Pico differentiates between the human and animal by whether one cultivates reason, or one succumbs to sensory pleasures. 'If he cultivates his rational seeds, he will become a heavenly animal. If he cultivates his intellectual seeds, he will be an angel, and a son of God (*Discourse on the Dignity of Man*, 6, 28-30.http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/Pico/index.html. Accessed 17.06.22.
- 6 Refer to Clare Caroll's 'Humanism and English literature in the fifteenth and sixteenth century' in Jill Kraye ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 246-268) for more on this.
- 7 Refer to the Kantian scholar Roger Sullivan's work on relation between respect and dignity.
- 8 I am indebted to Donna Harraway for pointing out the literal meaning of the word 'respect', – looking at another– in *Where Species Meet*; Series Editor, Cary Wolfe, *Posthumanities. Vol. iii.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
- 9 United Nations Organisation, "Preamble" *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 1948.
- 10 Refer to Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Part II: 'The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue,' Ak 419-420, in Kant, *Ethical Philosophy*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 1983). Also see *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* 4: pp. 434-435; in Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- 11 See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork*, 1998, pp. 80-81.
- 12 See Kant, *Groundwork*, pp. 84-85.
- 13 See Kant, 79.
- 14 See Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), chapter, 10.
- 15 See Hobbes, 63-64.
- 16 See *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907).
- 17 Refer to Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (The United States of America : Shocken Books, 1951).
- 18 Refer to Primo Levi's experiences in Nazi death camps, his life's experiences of indignity rituals, and his apposite naming of his reminiscences in Italian as *Se Questo e un Uomo* (Einaudi, 1947), *If This is a Man* Trans. Stuart Woolf (London: Abacus 1959).
- 19 See Friedrich von Schiller's *Don Carlos*, trans. R. D. Boylan (DoDo Press. Rpt. of an 1872 translation, 2007).

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- 20 S.L. Goldberg describes both Cordelia and Kent as Stoics as they are basic, integral in virtues in *An Essayon King Lear* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974. Rpt., 1980).
- 21 Refer to Stanley Wells' 'Tom O Bedlam's Song and *King Lear*' in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 12.3 (1961): 311-315, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2867066> Accessed: 17.06.22. Bedlam is a bowdlerised version of the Hospital of Saint Mary of Bethlehem, and mentioned as a lunatic hospital in 1402. It was converted to a civic lunatic asylum after 1547.
- 22 See J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (Secker and Warburg, 1999) and *The Lives of Animals* (Ed. and intro., Amy Gutman, Princeton University Press, 1999) for more on this.
- 23 Refer to “Without Rank” in Giorgio Agamben's *The Open: Man and Animal* ed. Werner Hamacher, trans. Kevin Atell (California: Stanford University Press, 2004) for an excellent discussion of such slippages of signification (chapter 8, pp. 29- 31).
- 24 Refer to Agamben's *The Open*, p. 37.
- 25 Refer to Virginia's Woolf's treatise *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and her creative recreation of William's 'silenced' sister Judith Shakespeare.